

## Stitches Across The Eye

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# Stitches Across The Eye

by [Cursedvibes](#)

## Summary

What would she even be like, after experiencing such trauma? Would she be the same Kaori? It didn't matter. He had loved her ever since he could remember and this tragedy wouldn't change that. Even death couldn't keep them apart. He would accept her no matter how the accident had changed her.

## Notes

Thank you to Desmonard for beta reading again :)

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*This love is gonna be the death of me*

*It's a danger*

*Cause our love is a ghost that the others can't see*

Jin sat on the cold hospital chair. His right leg was nervously bobbing up and down, sticky hands anxiously clasped on his lap. The hospital air was cool, creating goosebumps on his skin, but still he could feel sweat running down the back of his neck like little spider legs, getting lost in his sweater. White sterile light seemed to grow brighter with every minute, burning through his eyelids, through his eyes into his brain. For the millionth time, he looked at the big analog clock on the opposite wall. Time moved so slow, but also too fast. The doctors were taking forever in the operating room, but he also felt like they just stormed into the ER five minutes ago.

Unwelcome memories were digging their way up again. The accident. Kaori lying on the sidewalk. Kaori being lifted away by the medics. Her limbs in odd angles and her head covered in blood. So much blood it seemingly washed away her face.

Jin buried his face in his hands. He was feeling nauseous. Every time he heard footsteps, every time he saw movement in the corner of his eye, he looked up towards the glass door that was separating him from the operating rooms, hoping and dreading to see the head doctor come out. Passersby were giving him sympathetic glances, but none talked to him. He was glad for that. He wasn't sure his vocal cords would've had enough power to reply.

After what felt like an eternity, the destined door finally opened. A couple of nurses spilled out, spreading out and heading for their next task. The head doctor came last, walking ominously down the hallway. Jin jumped up, stumbling slightly, when his legs couldn't keep up with the sudden burst of energy. The doctor had taken off her scrub cap and let down her long dark ponytail. Too many thoughts were flooding Jin's mind. He was trying to analyse every microexpression of hers, preparing as best as possible for her verdict,

but her gaze was mostly cast down to her clipboard.

She finally opened the door and stood before him. Looking up, she almost reached his height. Her brows creased, the corners of her mouth turned downwards and Jin knew his answer.

“I’m sorry, Itadori-san, but she didn’t make it.”

Jin stumbled back, the world was turning. By chance, he managed to catch himself on the wall and then slowly slid down. Memories now came bursting forth and clouded his vision.

Kaori sharing bento boxes with him back in school. Kaori helping him study for the final exams, staying up until deep in the night. Kaori proposing to him. Both of them holding each other, when the news about Kaori’s infertility came. Kaori sleeping next to him with such a peaceful expression on her face.

He didn’t know how long he sat on the floor. The buzz of the hospital seemed far away. Vaguely, he registered the doctor still standing next to him. Talking to him. But he didn’t understand anything she said. Didn’t even bother to listen. What could she even say to comfort him. Nothing mattered anymore.

Another person stepped up to him. They lifted him from the floor. More nonsense words and then he was directed down the hall. Away from the doctor, away from Kaori. He wanted to turn, to run back and at least get one last look at her, but the stranger had a strong hold on his shoulders and pulled him further along.

Next, he found himself in a small kitchen, a paper cup filled with some cheap tea was placed in front of him. Tentatively, he grasped the hot beverage. The slight burn brought him further down to reality again. Jin wasn’t sure if he wanted that. The stranger, some sort of social worker, told him how they had called a taxi and that his fiancée’s belongings would be sent to him in the next few days, followed by more platitudes about how they were sorry for his loss. What bullshit. They probably didn’t even know what Kaori looked like. Desperate to escape the whole situation and be alone, Jin gulped down the hot tea, kind of relishing the burns. He stood up and fled the room without a word.

When he opened the door to their - his - apartment, it hit him. There were their shoes, standing next to each other as if nothing had happened. Kaori’s dark green jacket was still hanging on the coat hook. It was all so familiar, but that just accentuated the emptiness.

The hallway seemed to stretch on forever, darker and more imposing than usual. There was too much air, too much space that used to be filled by her. He managed to take off his shoes and throw his keys to the side before he broke down again. Stretching out on the floor, he buried his nails in the dark wood and cried. All his feelings flooding out, not letting themselves be contained any longer, slowly building small puddles beneath him.

At some point, Jin had fallen asleep curled in on himself. The obnoxious ringing of his phone roused him from his forgetful slumber. Groggily, he sat up. It was dark, except for the light from the street lamps outside the living room windows. He rubbed his eyes. The dried tears running salty lines across his face were an unfriendly reminder of the last 24 hours and his glasses had pressed uncomfortably into his face while he had lied on the floor. Sleepily he fished his phone out of the jacket he was still wearing. 4 am the display provided. So it had actually been more than 24 hours. He didn't recognize the number, but still accepted the call.

"Yes," he croaked, throat hoarse from sleep and crying.

*"Itadori-san! I'm glad I could reach you. This is Matsuo, I operated on your fiancée."* Jin flinched. *"Sorry to wake you, but I thought you would want to know this, as soon as we have definitive proof."*

"Could you get to the point," Jin grumbled, picking at his eye.

*"Yes, of course. Ito-san is alive."*

The information took its sweet time to be processed. "What?"

"It's unbelievable, but Ito-san returned to life. I can explain the details tomorrow morning. Or in a few hours, I guess."

Jin still hadn't quite caught up with what she was saying, but he got the most important part. "I'm coming over."

"She still needs time to recover, you can't see her yet," Matsuo-sensei protested.

"I will be there," was all he said before hanging up.

He took a full minute to just stare ahead and let everything that had just been said sink in. Kaori was alive. He would see her again. He had to see her now. Jumping up, he grabbed his car keys and stumbled more than ran out the door. On his way to the car, he checked his phone again. Four missed calls from his father and several unread messages. He just texted him: *everything's fine will explain later*

The streets were pleasantly empty, making Jin feel better about driving a little over the speed limit. At the hospital, he pestered a bored nurse at the reception about the room number and then sped to the elevators. Apparently, his arrival had been announced because a tired looking Matsuo-sensei stopped him, when he reached the right floor.

"Itadori-san. I understand your impatience, but you can't see her yet." Jin tried to walk past her, but she barred his way again. "We prepared a room for you to stay in for the next few hours. Let's go there and talk."

Without waiting for his response, she grasped his arm and dragged him to a nearby empty nurse break room. She motioned for him to sit down and he complied reluctantly.

"You must understand that she needs sleep. Honestly, she is doing much better than I expected under these circumstances, but it's barely 5 am." Jin wouldn't have just stormed into Kaori's room and shaken her awake anyway, he just wanted to see her. Assure himself with his own eyes, that she was alive and well. "So to start off, Ito-san did die. We suspect that her heart stopped for about 10 minutes, but it took us longer to realise that she had come back to us. Believe me, it was quite a shock for us too. She has made an almost miraculous recovery. I'm not promising anything, but she might even be able to leave the hospital in about a week. Of course I would recommend her to come back regularly for checkups."

Jin sat there, listening in reverence. It seemed too good to be true. It must be a dream. He would wake up any moment on the apartment floor with Kaori still covered in blood on some surgery table. "How is this possible?" he breathed.

"Usually, the brain can only survive up to six minutes without oxygen and clinical death is recognized three minutes after heart and breathing stopped. It is rare or even impossible to have patients make a full recovery after that. Ito-san wasn't by chance a diver?" she asked, medical curiosity peaking through.

“No, we didn’t go swimming that often,” Jin said, perplexed.

Matsuo-sensei rubbed her chin, “In any case, it seems the surgery was a success after all. She will probably have motoric difficulties and mood swings, maybe partial memory loss. Ito-san will likely have to fight these challenges her whole life, but it’s surprising enough that she’s able to walk and talk at all.”

Jin just stared at her, still not believing what he was hearing. Kaori was alive, she could walk and talk, she would come back home with him and in a few hours he would see her again.

Matsuo-sensei patted his shoulder again and stood up, “There’s some instant ramen and water on the counter. You are welcome to help yourself. We will get you, when everything’s ready.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “It won’t be me though. I need a break. Hopefully you understand.”

“Yes, of course,” he mumbled, then he shot up, remembering his manners. “Thank you for your hard work,” he made a deep bow and then clasped her hand, “I don’t know how I can ever repay you. Thank you so much!” He bowed a few more times.

She smiled at him indulgently, “It’s alright, I’m just doing my job,” she was about to turn around, but seemed to remember something, “Right, it would be great, if you could keep me updated on Ito-san’s recovery. She’s a curious case.”

Jin bowed one more time, “Of course, anything you want.” She smiled again and then left him in the break room.

It was now 10 am and Jin was impatiently pacing the room like a caged animal. He had used the time to rest a bit more and eat a little, but nothing helped him calm down. It was like he was waiting outside the surgery room again, except this time he was filled with giddy excitement. Every time a nurse or staff member entered, he jumped up, but they just got their food out of the fridge and left without even telling him how much longer he would have to wait.

Again the door opened and an older nurse with a goatee stuck his head inside.

“You can see her,” he simply said.

Jin was practically flying out of the room. He knew the room number by heart. 794. The nurse followed him at a slower pace.

When he reached the room, he stopped, heart hammering in his chest. He took note of Kaori’s name on the door. This was it, if he opened it and she was there, this would confirm this as being reality. That she was really with him again. The door handle in his hand felt heavy. What if it had all been a lie? What if he would see her again smothered in blood? What would she even be like, after experiencing such trauma? Would she be the same Kaori? It didn’t matter. He had loved her ever since he could remember and this tragedy wouldn’t change that. Even death couldn’t keep them apart. He would accept her no matter how the accident had changed her. With a deep breath, he opened the door.

There she was, sitting on the hospital bed, studying her hands, watching every finger stretch and curl. She had a white bandage wrapped around her forehead and was wearing grey sweatpants and a washed out t-shirt, probably provided by the hospital, so she didn’t have to wear her bloody clothes from the accident.

Slowly he took a few careful steps into the room. Hearing him enter, she lifted her head. Meeting her light brown eyes, the reality of the situation came crashing down on him. She was here, she was alive, they would be together again. A choking sob escaped him and he rushed to breach the last meters separating them. As soon as physically possible, he brought her into a hug. He was clinging to her like a liferaft, still careful not to crush her too much. This was it, he was really holding her. Burying his face in the crook of her neck he could smell her familiar scent under all the disinfectant. Tears were running down his nose and dropping into her tee.

He could feel a slim hand lightly pat his back. Reluctantly, he let her go. From up close he could see her state of recovery more clearly. The bloody image that had burned itself into his memory was gone. There were still some bruises covering the side of her face and neck, but no visible blood. Her arms and legs were wrapped in bandages. Jin was surprised they weren’t in a cast. His stomach turned at remembering the odd angles her limbs had stuck out. That hadn’t seemed like something a few bandages could fix. Looking closely, he could also make out more bandages covering her upper torso.



Jin pushed up his glasses to wipe his tears away. Kaori just looked at him impassively, waiting for him to calm down.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he laughed, "I can't believe it, it's really you."

"In the flesh," she replied, one corner of her mouth slightly turning up. Her voice was a little hoarse, but it was still unmistakably her.

"How are you feeling? Are you in pain?" he pressed.

"Much better. Not any pain really," she lifted her hand again and clumsily touched every finger with her thumb. "I'm getting the hang of this."

"She still has to stay for at least a week and we will have to run a few more tests." Goatee interjected from behind. He had awkwardly waited out the reunion. Kaori's expression seemed to darken at his words. "The doctor scheduled an MRI for tomorrow."

"That's not necessary," Kaori retorted, surprisingly forceful.

The nurse hadn't expected any opposition, "I'm sorry, but that's what has been ordered. It will show us how well your brain recovered from the accident and if there is still any critical damage."

"I know and I'm saying it's not necessary," she sat up straighter, fixing the nurse with a glare, "I'm fine and will only get better. You can find out anything you need to know through physical therapy, if needed."

Nervously, the nurse looked over to Jin, as if expecting backup from him. When not receiving any, he relented, "Okay, I will talk with Matsuo-sensei about it." Visibly uncomfortable, he left the room.

Jin watched the door fall shut and then carefully sat down on the bed next to Kaori.

"Why are you so against it? It can't hurt to do it, right? Just to be on the safe side."

She sighed, "I just don't like those loud tubes. Makes me claustrophobic."

He nodded. Kaori had struggled with claustrophobia since she had been a teenager. "I didn't think of that." Slowly she edged further on her bed, so she could lean against the wide cushion. Jin's gaze fell on her bandaged arms again. "How are your bones doing? I'm surprised

they didn't put any casts on you."

She rolled her right arm experimentally, "Better and better. They fixed most of it during surgery."

Jin raised an eyebrow in surprise, "But they still have to grow back together. Don't you need a cast for that?"

"They weren't actually broken. Just a contusion, maybe slightly cracked."

His mind flashed to the image of Kaori sprawled on the pavement again. "But I saw you. I'm sure there was even part of the bone poking out of your left arm," he motioned to the bruised limb.

Kaori gave him a pitying smile, "You were in shock. The blood must've thrown you off, it wasn't that bad. Look," with that she began poking at her bandage. Her movements were still slow and she was obviously having trouble with the clip.

Jin hurriedly clasped her hand, "I believe you! Maybe it was just the panic. Everything was happening so fast, it was hard to tell," he trailed off.

Her smile became warmer, "You worry too much. Just take things for what they are now."

He covered her hand in both of his and put them in his lap, "Yes, let's forget about that. You are here and that's all that counts." He squeezed her hand for emphasis. It looked pale and scrawny between his palms. Carefully, he rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. She stared at their intertwined hands with a kind of strained expression.

The silence was broken by Jin's phone. While he fished for the device in his jacket, Kaori used the opportunity to pull her hand back. Looking at the screen, he saw his father's number impatiently blinking at him. After some mental preparation, he accepted the call.

"Hi," that was all he could get out before being overrun with questions.

*"Where are you? What happened? Are you alright? Is Kaori..."* , his father didn't dare finish the sentence.

Jin chuckled, "Everything's fine. I'm at the hospital. Kaori is here with me. The doctor says she might even be released soon." He looked

over to his fiancée. She ignored the conversation and focused on practicing her leg movements instead. Stretched out over the edge of the bed, she tapped her toes, then rolled her entire foot clockwise in slow deliberation.

A sigh of relief came through the phone speaker, *"You have to inform me about things like this. I will go bald if you keep worrying me like this."* Jin snorted. *"The accident sounded quite severe, I was thinking the worst. I will come to you,"* his voice didn't allow any room for protest.

"Okay, we will be waiting for you. It's the second floor, Room 794." He said goodbye and hung up. "My father will be coming by in a few minutes," he told Kaori.

She smiled at him again, the emotion not quite reaching her eyes, "I see."

"I didn't tell him about your," he made some vague gestures in the air, "timeout." Immediately he wanted to slap himself. That was possibly the worst way to describe death, but he couldn't bring himself to say the actual word. "I don't want to unnecessarily worry him."

Her smile grew sharper, "Thank you."

Twenty minutes later, his father arrived. In the meantime Jin had tried to make conversation with Kaori, but failed miserably. She answered all his questions and talking points in short onenote sentences and didn't really make any efforts to keep the conversation going. He figured it must be shock or the painkillers and after a while just sat silently in the stool he had pulled up to the bed. Kaori looked out the window and absentmindedly continued practicing her physical exercises.

When his father opened the door, Jin was glad for the distraction. The older man hurried into the room, then abruptly stopped a few meters away, when he locked eyes with Kaori. Confused, Jin watched a multitude of emotions run across his father's face. Relief, shock, confusion, caution... suspicion? Kaori impassively held his gaze.

Wasuke swallowed and took another step forward. "Kaori?", his voice

was uncharacteristically shaky.

“Father,” Kaori said with a bright smile. They weren’t married yet, but Jin had been together with her for so long that she was already treated as family.

“How are you?”, Wasuke asked, still seeming a bit out of it.

She shrugged, “I’ve been better, but things are improving.”

Behind them, the door opened again and Matsuo-sensei entered armed with her clipboard. “I see the whole family is here,” she greeted, “I’m just going to do some simple tests and ask a few questions.” She stood by the window, while her patient shuffled to the edge of the bed.

She shined a light into Kaori’s eyes and wrote something down. Then she asked her to stretch out her arms, clench and stretch her fingers, touch her nose and curl her toes. After taking some more notes, she challenged her to get up and take a few steps. Kaori’s movements were a little wooden and unsteady, but she managed to walk around the bed and stand beside Wasuke. He gave her a calculating look.

“That’s great, you’re making quick progress. Was this exhausting or do you feel like you could walk further?”

Kaori passed the older man and stood next to Jin, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Probably not enough for a marathon, but this wasn’t very tiring,” she replied.

Matsuo-sensei nodded. “That concludes the physical part. I would now like to ask some questions,” she motioned towards the two men, “It’s good that you are here. To test her memory, could you please ask some questions about past experiences? They can be recent or from ten years ago, it doesn’t matter. Both would be good, actually.”

Jin looked up to Kaori, searching for some good questions to ask her. Before he could find the words, his father blurted out, “When did we first meet.”

Kaori turned around to him. “July 1989. It was at the school’s summer festival.”

“What was the first meal we cooked together,” he immediately shot back.

“Gyoza with vegetable and tofu filling. You burned your hand on the

pan,” she replied nonplussed. He hummed.

Jin finally settled on his questions. “What was the last thing you ate before the accident?”

She put her head to the side in thought, “Crepe. Strawberry flavor. You had banana.”

Jin nervously licked his lips. “What was the last thing you said to me before the medics came?”

Her gaze burned down at him and her brows furrowed for a moment, then she smiled kindly. “I love you.”

He studied her face. There was something empty about her eyes. Truly, her expression was familiar. Her facial muscles were going through all the same motions, but there was no emotion behind it. Like a realistic mask.

“No,” he finally said. For a second her eyes widened, but the smile stayed frozen in place. The hand on his shoulder clenched. It wasn’t painful, but there was more force behind it than he thought she currently possessed. “You said, ‘I’m sorry’.” Light brown eyes bored into him. Something moved behind them, looking at him through Kaori’s eyes, studying him like a researcher with a sick laboratory mouse. Was he worth keeping? Would the experiment be continued? Was he still useful? She blinked and the force pushing him down lightened. Her hand relaxed.

“Right,” she said. “The shock must’ve affected my memory.” Ignoring the shivers running through him, he forced the corners of his lips up.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it,” Matsuo-sensei interjected, not noticing the tension in the air. “It can take months or in severe cases even years for traumatic memories to return. For now this is perfectly normal. It has barely been two days since the incident.” She looked between the family members. “Right, that is enough for today. Now I just have to take a look at your bandages.”

Kaori limped around the bed again, making a point to shoot Wasuke a look before passing him. Sitting on the bed again, she held out her left arm to the doctor, who carefully peeled off the cloth. After the last layer was removed, Matsuo-sensei made a low whistling sound. “That’s incredible. Most of it is just contusions.”

Leaning back, Kaori shoved her arm into Jin’s face. “See? No bones sticking out,” she said with a triumphant smirk on her face. It was

true. There wasn't even a scar, just blotches of dark red and purple bruises. On impulse he touched her arm. Solid bone and nothing suggesting that it had ever been otherwise. She didn't even flinch at his grip.

"It's miraculous," he breathed.

The rest turned out to be the same; her legs still looking worse than the rest of her body. They sported a kaleidoscope of red, blue, green, and purple. In the end Matsuo-sensei judged that she wouldn't need any bandages on her arms and upper body. She spread some salve that would help dissolve the bruising on Kaori's legs and then reapplied new bandages.

"Right, that just leaves the head." She unwrapped the cloth around Kaori's head and gave her a close inspection, lifting some of her hair to get a better look. "Looks good as well. I think we don't need the bandages here either." With the tip of her fingers she lightly tapped against different parts of Kaori's skull. "Does this hurt? Any headaches?" Kaori shook her head. The doctor gave her a satisfied nod.

Kaori turned to father and son again. "What do you think?"

Jin abruptly pushed back in his seat and he could hear a gasp from his father. There was a deep gash running horizontally across her forehead. Stitches were keeping it together, but it still looked like she could lift off the upper part of her skull without much trouble. The flesh was swollen red. If he focused, Jin could swear he saw something moving underneath it. He swallowed hard.

Kaori - Kaori? - leaned her chin on her hand and gave him a bright smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes. "Not so bad, don't you think?"

All Jin could muster was a stammer. The air suddenly seemed too thin in the room. As if in a trance, Jin leaned forward again, eyes transfixed by the red chasm. The stitches leading across it like thin bridges. He had to get closer. Look deeper into the dark. What would he find at the bottom? The force from before was back, now pulling him in. Slowly he stretched out a hand, brown eyes following his every movement. Beckoning him ever closer. His fingertips were centimeters away from the fleshy gorge.

Then he was forcefully pulled back by a strong hand.

“That’s enough,” Wasuke barked. He had positioned himself between his son and the bodily presence of Kaori.

She looked up at him in mock innocence. “What’s the matter, father?”, she drew out the last word, “Don’t like what you see?”

The older man just grasped Jin by the arm. “Come, we should go home.” He tried to pull his son along, but found him rooted to the floor. Still unable to take his eyes off the woman on the bed. She beckoned him closer. His legs moved without thinking.

“Would you be so kind and bring some of my clothes tomorrow? Maybe a toothbrush too,” she said in a low voice. Jin nodded robotically. She padded his cheek, “Great, thanks.” Her hand didn’t move away from his face. In thought she studied his expression for a moment, then leaned in and planted a soft kiss on his lips. “Have a good night.”

“You too,” he said, the words escaping him before he knew any better. It was the middle of the day. When he finally let himself be dragged away by his father, he watched her wave him goodbye and then turn to the doctor, who didn’t know what to make of the whole exchange. The last thing he heard before the door of room 794 closed behind him was:

“Now, about that MRI scan.”

Leaving the hospital felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Finally he was able to breathe deeply again. The fog in his mind was starting to clear up. The events from a few minutes ago seemed so unreal already.

Since his father had come with a taxi, he offered him a ride home. The car’s doors had barely closed before Wasuke released all his pent up opinions.

“That’s not Kaori. I don’t know what happened to her, but that’s not her. It’s dangerous, I can feel it. Something’s wrong,” he looked over to Jin, “I saw the way she... it... whatever, looked at you and the way you were transfixed by that stare. That’s unnatural. You shouldn’t go back. It’s still hurt and can’t move much for now. We should take that

opportunity and leave it at the hospital.”

Jin furrowed his brows and glared intensely at the street ahead of him. “Could you not talk like that about Kaori? She’s a person, not an object.”

His father looked at him in disbelief, “You saw that gruesome wound on her forehead and the way the doctor seemed unbothered by it. I think she couldn’t even see it. There’s something wrong about this whole situation, you can’t deny it.”

“It’s the stress from the accident and the surgery. I don’t know what that gash on her forehead is, but she hasn’t actually done anything wrong. You are being too dramatic.” He had lost her once and he couldn’t let that happen again. As long as she was with him, everything would work out in the end. That’s how it had always been.

“You can’t be serious. Do you need someone to die first? I can understand that you want Kaori back, but not like this. This is a bastardization of her memory.” Wasuke was pressed against the car door as Jin sharply turned into a street with a long apartment complex and then hit the brakes.

“It’s your stop,” he stated darkly, not looking at his father.

The old man sighed, “Please, don’t go back to the hospital. I know you’re mad now, but it’s better in the long run.” Jin ignored him. His father opened the door and got out. Before leaving he turned around, “You can always talk to me. I will help you in whatever way I can. I will always be there for you.”

Jin looked down on his hands clasped around the steering wheel and just gave an acknowledging hum. Wasuke got out, looked one more time back to his son and then walked towards his apartment that was still two blocks away. After he got out of sight, Jin started the motor again and made his way back to his own home.

This time coming back to his apartment was different. There was nobody else there, but he knew that wouldn’t last. In only a few days Kaori would be back with him as if nothing ever happened.

His mind flashed back to the accident. The pool of blood. Her red hand clasping onto him. She was gasping for breath. *I’m sorry*

Limbs twisted in odd angles. Had there really been bones visible? Skin marked by bruises, but unbroken. Black threads spanning across swollen skin, ready to tear at any moment. Hollow brown eyes



dissecting him.

He shook himself out of it. His gaze fell again on Kaori's forest green jacket hanging in the entrance. She was alive, that was the only thing that mattered. Nothing could stop him from seeing her again. At least one more time. One more time to find out what had happened to her.

When he opened his eyes, Kaori's face was swimming in front of him upside down. Her black hair seemed to melt with the darkness surrounding her. A light red line was crowning her forehead. After a few blinks the world came more into focus. He was lying in his bed, same PJs that he remembered going to sleep in. Kaori was perched behind his head and smiling down at him. She was still wearing the second-hand clothes from the hospital. Confused, he looked around, but beyond his bed there was nothing. Just inky blackness.

Cold fingertips danced across his brow, accompanied by a tutting sound. "Jin, Jin, what am I supposed to do with you? Don't turn out to be more trouble than you're worth."

His gaze shot up to her again. Despite the darkness, her eyes seemed to shimmer in a brown-orange light. The fresh wound above them was more pronounced than he remembered from the hospital. It seemed that any moment, blood would come running out and drip all over Jin's face. "Who are you?" he whispered.

Vulture-like she was looking down at him. He felt like a butterfly pinned-up on display. "I'm Kaori. This is her body and I have her memories. What more is there to a person." Her fingers slid down his cheek and under his chin. "Didn't you always want a family? I can make that wish come true. I can give you a child. We can be a family."

Jin's eyes widened, "You can do that? But Kaori... you..."

"I can heal a broken skull, some ovaries are nothing," she smirked.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked. "Why this second chance?"

Her fingers trailed further down to his neck. Out of the corner of his eye, Jin could still see the bruises on her arm. "It is part of a larger plan. You can help humanity take it's next step in evolution. Our child

will play a role in bringing humanity closer to it's true purpose."

This sounded outlandish. How could this be real? A plan? Humanity's purpose? He reached up and touched her arm. It was solid and slightly warm. If he shifted his fingers a bit, he could feel a faint pulse. Did it really matter? He didn't care about some great plan for humanity, all he cared about was Kaori, his family. And she was here with him. If she still had her memories, that meant that the last 14 years he'd known her, were still with her too. That had to mean something. Whatever changes death had brought, their relationship, their love was still there. How could he squander the opportunity that had been given to him. To them. He looked up to that all so familiar face. His gaze lingered on her forehead again.

"What happened to your head? Why has that wound not healed like everything else?"

She hummed, "It's a binding vow, the exchange for bringing life back into this body. As time goes on, it will look less gastly. Don't worry about it."

So that was the reason Kaori had been able to come back. It looked gruesome now and it felt wrong to see it on her face, but it was also what would make his dream of a family come true. A family with Kaori. Like in the hospital he reached out for it, transfixed. And like in the hospital he stopped, just a few centimeters shy. Her fingers further spread over his neck, palm now touching his skin. The subconscious fear of her breaking his neck reared up, but got smothered down immediately. He closed the distance and touched the open flesh. It felt soft, hotter than the rest of her skin and slightly wet. Judging by the half lidded eyes that watched him, it wasn't painful. Jin wondered if he would find whoever orchestrated this, if he pushed further into the wound. The one making the plans and with the ability to bring people back to life. His fingers minimally inched closer to the chasm that led to the unknown. Her hand left his neck and closed around his own instead. She had her eyes closed completely now. They stayed like this for a while, he didn't know how long. Jin was unsure if she wanted him to push forward or pull his fingers away.

Finally, she exhaled and drew his hand back. Opening her eyes, she held his hand ephemerally before placing it back on the covers. "You should go back to sleep." He didn't know what to say. She stood up and surveyed him one last time. "Don't forget my clothes tomorrow."

Darkness closed in on him and her silhouette became hazy. "Good

night,” he called after her, then she was gone. Everything was gone and he fell back into the unconsciousness of sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Don't be like Jin. Don't stick your hand in crazy.

# Chapter 2

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

After Jin woke up, he took a few minutes to just lie on his back and reflect on everything that had happened in the last two days. The accident. Kaori, hit by a car. Being taken to the ER. The surgery that seemed to go on forever. Her death hitting him, and making him stumble towards an abyss he hadn't known was inside him. Her miraculous recovery. A head split in two and stitched back together. A dream that wasn't quite a dream and not quite reality.

Kaori was back and he would even get the opportunity to have a real family with her. But he also knew that a part of her had died on that bloody asphalt. The question was, how much? Her body was here, more or less intact, and her memories were still alive, but there was also something else, or someone else. The one who had brought her back to life. Jin looked at the hand that had touched the wound on her forehead. Nothing was there, no shimmering wetness on his fingers. Whoever was behind those stitches was alien, but were they necessarily malicious? They had made no direct threat to Jin. Everything that had happened in that hospital room had him freaked out, but it hadn't been dangerous.

His father's words came back to him. He should be glad that nothing had happened and should now leave while he still could, take his chances, while the wounds still hadn't healed. But he couldn't just turn his back on Kaori. Just imagining her, sitting alone in that hospital room, waiting with nobody to keep her company twisted his gut. How could he just move on with his life, when Kaori was obviously alive and well? Jin threw back his blanket and stood up. He couldn't.

Without much consideration for the food, he wolfed down his breakfast and went about collecting Kaori's things. First of all, clothes. Given her injuries, she probably preferred something loose and comfortable. He chose a thick cream coloured sweater, her black track pants, a purple t-shirt and some underwear, and stacked everything neatly into an old paper bag. When turning away from the closet, he noticed a book on her nightstand. Jin went over and picked it up. Murakami's *Sputnik Sweetheart*. A bookmark indicated that she was barely halfway through, still he remembered that she had already

recommended it to him. Kaori was very stingy about her book recommendations. It was notorious enough that she had been asked for reviews a few times, even though her editorial focus was on economy. He put the book on top of the clothes. That just left the toothbrush.

As he was standing in front of the entrance of Sugisawa Hospital, his second thoughts caught up to him again. The light grey building was looming over him, seemingly watching him out of dozens of glassy eyes. He could still turn back, a quiet voice that sounded suspiciously like his father told him. Jin opened the door. Oppressive air greeted him, pressing down on his shoulders, and making him feel dizzy. He took a step forward and let himself be swallowed by the breath of overly ventilated air, and the smell of disinfectant. The buzzing sound of staff with too little time for too many people welcomed him. It slowly died out as he made his way to the third floor. Yesterday, he had been speeding through the halls, legs barely capable of following his thoughts, but today he took his time. Every step taken with caution, and with every step that voice in the back of his mind became fainter.

There he was again, at the door to room 794. It took him less time now to find the courage to press down the handle. Kaori was standing by the window, hands leaning on the sill, back turned to him. As he walked closer, she turned around.

“You actually came,” she stated, a sly smile playing around her lips.

“Well, you asked me to bring your stuff,” he held up the large paper bag.

“And you just did it?” she snorted, “Truly hopeless.”

He put the bag on her bed. The bruises on her arms had changed colour, green and yellow instead of red or purple. The ones on her face were gone completely. Just the wound on her forehead. Like a red grin, leering at him.

“It felt rude not to,” he simply said, nervously scratching his neck. It was like the dream from last night was replaying itself. His mind was on edge and his muscles tense.

She took the book from the top of the pile and casually flipped through it.

"Thanks. It's been a while since I've read this," Jin was momentarily confused before catching the implications of her words. A chill crept down his spine. "A good book," she continued, "You should read it too. There are some things you could learn from it."

He didn't know how to take this, so he just nodded. She looked at the toothbrush with a kind of miffed expression, turning it between her fingers.

"You couldn't have brought me a new one? I know there are still some under the sink."

Jin blinked, disconcerted. "Uhm—"

"Well, I guess it is mine, so it'll have to do for now." She put the toothbrush back in its case and threw it carelessly on the bed. Her face brightened up, as she pulled the clothes out. "Great. Finally I can get rid of this."

Nonchalantly, she pulled off her tee and damned it to join the equally unloved toothbrush. Hastily, Jin jumped in front of the window and messily pulled the curtains shut. This was the third floor, but still, a passerby could just casually look up and see Kaori strip through the window. He wouldn't risk that. "People will see you," he whispered.

She turned around, still topless, her purple shirt bunched up in one hand. "That's cute, but we're on the third floor. Who's supposed to see me."

Jin still had his hands clawed in the curtains and was trying to use his not all that impressive stature as a second shield. "Still. This window faces the street. Who knows who will look up here."

"They must have really good eyesight," she drawled. Then she leaned her head to the side, studying him. A smirk stretched across her lips. "Are you jealous?" she sauntered closer, lightly swinging her t-shirt by her side. Jin's face was heating up. He stared at her bare torso. With the dimmed light he could barely see the green and yellow blotches on her skin. It was as if nothing had ever happened. No surgery, no accident. He had seen Kaori naked a million times, but the way she was looking up at him right now was somehow making him feel self-conscious. "I did some good work, don't you think?" she poked at her ribs. "As good as new," only a hand's width was separating their faces. The hand with the tee moved as if reaching for the curtains. "Don't

you think I should be allowed to show off?" She threw the t-shirt around his neck and pulled him close.

Her kiss was forceful, leaving him gasping for breath. He felt her small breasts press up against his body. On the tip of his tongue, he could make out Kaori's familiar taste. It gave him security. He closed his eyes and let the kiss deepen. His hands relaxed, he let go of the curtain and instead sought the comforting warmth of Kaori's hips. Just a few days before, they had done the same thing, but that seemed an eternity ago. There was a desperation to reacquaint himself with her body, to make up for time that hadn't been lost. It was the same. The same kiss, the same taste, the same feeling. Nothing had been lost. Nothing had changed.

She bit his lip. He pulled back, reluctantly opening his eyes.

"Sorry about that," she didn't sound very apologetic. Red cut-open skin danced in front of his eyes. Something was glistening underneath it. Still kind of dizzy, he wiped it off her forehead with a fingertip. It was clear, but had a too smooth texture to be sweat. There was no particular odor to it.

He was released from the t-shirt noose and she took a step back, picking at the black threads holding her head together, tightening them ever so slightly. Absentmindedly, he rubbed the fluid between his fingers, watching her clean her lips with a thumb. "Wasn't that fun," there was a gloating tone in her voice. Her intense gaze was on him like a tiger skulking their prey, taking note of every ever so minor twitch of his muscles.

Jin licked his lips. There was a hint of blood. That was certainly different. He cleared his throat, not knowing what to say. Finally, she put on the t-shirt and also swiftly changed her underwear and pants. Leaning against the windowsill, he just mutely observed her. She threw him a few looks, but didn't say anything either. Her legs looked better, but not nearly as well healed as the rest of her body. Still, streaks of red and purple mixing with lighter colours. Just then, he noticed that she wasn't limping anymore. There was also no hint of the previously clumsy hand movements.

"You seem a lot better," his voice was still shaking a little. She looked up from the roll of socks she was currently untangling. "The injuries are almost gone."

"Thank you. A good night's sleep can do wonders for your health." It

sure could.

“Has the doctor said anything about your discharge date?” he asked tentatively. Jin wasn’t sure what answer he was hoping for. He wanted nothing more than to have Kaori back with him, but at the same time, the thought of bringing this... not-Kaori into his home made him shiver. Not because he was necessarily scared of her hurting him, after all she apparently needed him for whatever plans she had, but because seeing her peculiar personality shine through the cracks in the face of his childhood friend and lover was nauseating. It was similar to haunted houses, where a figure in something you thought to be a simple picture, suddenly started to move. Or a horror movie where a person would turn around to the camera, revealing an expression that shouldn’t belong on their face.

“Yes, in two days,” she said cheerfully, joining him by the window and ripping open the curtains with one swift motion, “I should be all tidied up by then. Well, except for this,” she pointed to her forehead. Sunlight was lighting up the cut. It looked more normal now. A slight swelling, but the skin was fitting more smoothly together. No open wound and no visible fluids. Absentmindedly, he wiped his hands on his trousers.

She was looking out the window, watching people trickle in and out of the visitors entrance to the hospital. “Do you still want to do this?” For the first time today, she sounded serious. “You seem a little freaked out.”

Was he actually getting a choice here? Would she just let him walk away, if he wanted to? Somehow he doubted that, but then again in the dream last night it had kind of sounded like she had other alternatives for her plans. *Don’t turn out to be more trouble than you’re worth.* A threat? Or a way out? Even if she let him go, would he want to? She probably wouldn’t leave Kaori’s body, since she went through so much trouble to heal it. And without her, he would lose his only chance of a life and a family with the woman he loved.

He studied her. The sunlight was shining on Kaori’s dark hair. Truly black hair, no trace of brown in it. He had always loved it. Maybe because his family traditionally had such light coloured hair. He remembered how no matter what she did, she never looked disheveled. The wind would blow hair in her eyes and she just pushed it back, annoyed but unbothered and pristine.

The same profile. Dark eyebrows, thicker than his own, but that



wasn't saying much. Long eyelashes, soft skin, light brown eyes. An expression that was too calculating. More apathetic than he had ever seen on Kaori's face. Maybe it was the hospital. It was suffocating. Just walking through the corridors freaked him out. It also reminded him too much of the accident and those hours waiting in front of the surgical room. He should get to know this not-quite-Kaori in a better, death-free environment. Worth a try at any rate.

"Are you allowed to go outside?" he asked.

She looked up, "Yes. There's a garden. Although calling it a garden is very generous."

"Okay, then let's go there. I need to get out of here." He pushed away from the windowsill and walked a few steps, then turned around expectantly. She eyed him up thoughtfully, then went about getting her sneakers from under her bed. They were miraculously unbloodied from the accident.

Being outside did help a lot. Jin took a deep breath and stretched, shoulders audibly popping. A cool breeze was clearing up his tumbled thoughts and the sun was actually making this outside area look kind of nice. Calling it a garden was truly an exaggeration. Most of it was block pavement and stones, with a few trees and bushes sprinkled in between. Kaori trailed behind him, lazily overlooking the sparse greenery.

"Feels good, getting away from that cursed energy," she mumbled.

"What?" he glanced back.

"Feels good to be in fresh air," she repeated.

He hummed in agreement. "Much better. This is where you can have real conversations with people." They walked to a bench that had been placed near a plane tree, giving shadow but still letting some rays of sunlight shine through. Jin sat down first, intently looking up to Kaori for her to follow his example. After some hesitation, she did. "So," Jin started, "Who are you?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You already asked that. And I told you."

“None of that. Who are you as a person?” he pointed to the cut on her forehead, “You. You are a person, right?”

She snorted, “Yes.”

“Good. That already makes things much easier.”

“Open air really makes you liven up,” she noted under her breath.

“What do you do, when you aren’t making grand plans for humanity?” Jin continued, unconcerned.

She furrowed her brows, “What do you mean?”

“You must do things in your everyday life. Before you came here. You said you read *Sputnik Sweetheart* before. When was that?”

“Ah,” she said weakly. “Three years ago. Shortly after it came out.”

“I see. You like Murakami Haruki?” Jin turned further to her, putting one leg on the bench, making himself comfortable.

“I guess. His writing style is interesting,” she still had a cautious tone to her, as if suspecting that he would turn the knowledge of her favourite author against her.

“What is your favourite book of his?”

She thoughtfully looked to the side before deciding, “*Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*”

Jin put his chin in his hand and sized her up, “Hm, I see. Seems fitting.”

“Are you just going to keep pestering me like this?” she looked enervated, but not seriously upset.

“If you are going to be with me for the foreseeable future, I need to know who I’m dealing with. You know so much about me already, it’s only fair.”

She sighed, “Why do I always attract these types,” crossing her legs on the bench, she also got in a more casual sitting position and threw up her hands, “Okay, whatever. What do you want to know?” Jin grinned and began shooting out questions.

He didn’t get that many useful answers from her, not even a name, but

it was better than nothing. She traveled a lot and particularly liked Hokkaido. She was interested in different cultures and languages. She played board games and was pretty good at Mahjong, Go, and Shogi. It wasn't a lot, but it made him feel more secure. This wasn't some supernatural force of nature, he was dealing with a real person. The whole situation became more down-to-earth and human. Talking to Kaori, but not really to the same person he had known all those years, still made him uncomfortable, but he knew better how to deal with it. It gave him more confidence that he would be able to go through with this.

"How old are you?"

She chuckled, "It's impolite to ask a lady her age."

Kaori was no pure flower child, but compared to this one, she was basically Yamato Nadeshiko. "I just want to know what dimensions we are talking about. Are you around my age or like, a hundred?"

Suppressed laughter was making her shoulders shake. "No. I'm not 'a hundred'," she echoed.

"Well that's a relief, so I'm not dealing with some grandmother here," Jin had to laugh too.

"I'm older."

He choked. "Seriously?" She just smiled. "So... 200?" Her smile grew wider. "500?" It didn't waver. "Actually, I don't think I want to know."

"Yeah, that's probably for the better," she agreed, smiling brightly.

Jin studied her more carefully, replaying their previous conversations. "You don't really act like someone that's so ancient."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"I would expect you to spend your time meditating in the mountains about the meaning of life or something similar," he furrowed his brow, "You don't even sound old. My father talks more like a geezer than you do."

She put one arm on the backrest of the bank and leaned her head on her hand. "I've done my share of meditation, but I still keep in touch with society. Those hermits certainly exist too," she looked into the

distance with a fox-like expression on her face, “But isolation will leave you weak and dulled. Keeping in touch with the world, the people, will challenge your mind and make you less vulnerable. Studying people will give you greater knowledge than shutting everyone out and focussing only on yourself,” she looked at him again, “As culture and society evolves, you do too. You didn’t grow up with a computer, but you can still use one now no problems. That, but on a greater scale, is also true for me.”

It made sense, but this had definitely shown her age. She seemed bigger to him now. Like a shadow that was looming over Kaori’s unassuming frame. A cloud was shutting out the sun, throwing a veil of gray over the two. Jin furrowed his eyebrows, “I see.” He looked up to the sky. “Maybe we should go inside again.” He stood up.

She just hummed and followed him after a moment.

For the next two days, Jin was kept quite busy. He stayed with Kaori in the hospital until lunch or early afternoon, then worked his way through insurance forms and the accident complaint he sent to the police. Unfortunately, he saw no other way to navigate this bureaucratic hell than to seek some advice from his father. First, he tried to get the whole thing done over the phone, but naturally the old man insisted on an actual meeting. The paperwork kept them busy for a while, but of course the inevitable questions had to come. Medical records had to be sent to the insurance company and alas, his father had looked a little too closely at the written report.

They were sitting on the kitchen table, surrounded by papers and envelopes. He slid the report over to Jin. “What is this?”

“A copy of the medical report,” Jin replied without looking up from the form he was currently filling out.

“Don’t play coy with me, son,” he pointed at a line of text, “This talks about ‘time of death’.” Jin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Here we go. “You never told me anything about death.”

He pushed up his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Well, you are worrying me now. Kaori is like a daughter to me, you know that. How could you not tell me she died?” his father said, disbelieving.

“It wasn’t for long. She is alive and well now,” Jin sighed, already knowing how this conversation would go.

“Is she? Honestly, that explains a lot. The wound, the changed personality, the way she acts around you. How can you go back to the hospital knowing this?” a desperate tone had crept into his voice.

“Kaori is alive. Do you expect me to just turn around and move on with my life? If there is a way to live with her, I’m accepting it. I can’t give up on her,” he insisted.

His father sighed and pulled his chair closer. “I can understand that and believe me, I want Kaori back too, but not like this. You are chasing ghosts.”

“It is her body and she has her memories,” he repeated, almost mechanically.

The old man's gaze softened, “Listen to yourself. You know that is not her.”

“Well,” Jin was searching for words, “It’s complicated.” His father lifted a brow. “She isn’t bad. I’m not in any danger.” Even he could tell that his words sounded like weak excuses.

“You have to stop meeting her and don’t even think about bringing her home. If you are lucky, whatever has possessed Kaori’s body will move on. Since you haven’t been hurt yet, there is still hope for you to get away.”

Jin burrowed his head in his hands, pressing his palms into his temples. “But she’s all I have.” His eyes were burning. “I lost her once and I’m not going through that again.” He remembered how cold the apartment had felt that night, how empty and lifeless. The shadows darker than black, threatening to overwhelm him. The pit in his heart. It had just been a few hours, but it had been the worst ones in his entire life. Just imagining having to relive this, when the remedy was so close, almost within reach... “I don’t care,” he lifted up his head, “If this is all that is left of Kaori, I am taking it and I won’t let it go.”

His father’s eyes widened. “You can’t mean that,” he breathed, “That is suicidal. You don’t even know what you are dealing with here.”

He shrugged, "I've talked to her the past few days, and it's not that bad." If you ignored the occasional cryptic remark, vague statements about the future of humanity, intense behaviour and ambiguity of her true nature.

The older man's eyes widened, "You are serious," when Jin just held his gaze, he continued, "You are making a big mistake."

"Mistakes are part of life. Just let me live mine the way I want."

His father leaned back, seemingly having lost all drive. "There are some mistakes you can't recover from." He stood up. "I can only beg you to rethink. If you want to go through with this, then I can't stop you, but please," he looked down at his son, "Don't make this decision impulsively."

Jin just crossed his arms. After not getting any further response, his father left and he was alone again, only the unfinished paperwork as his company.

*Jin was standing on an empty crossroad. No wind, just a grey sky. There was no living being in sight. The air was cool and smelled like recent rain, but the streets weren't wet. He recognized this place. Six lanes, divided by an alley of trees in the middle and on the side. There was a good crepe shop nearby.*

*A croaking sound reached him, it was coming from the side of the road. He knew what he would see before he even turned around. There was a body lying in the gutter. Small puddles of blood slowly forming underneath. He didn't want to look, he didn't want to see it again, but his body moved on it's own, forcing him to come closer.*

*There she was, taking painful breaths, barely conscious. Her limbs were twisted in unnatural angles, bones sticking out through ripped clothing. A deep wound in her head, near her temple. The hair, dampened by blood and coloured in a dark red. Her life was unrelentingly flowing out, trailing across her face, running into her eyes. He wanted to look away. He wanted to scream, to cry, but he couldn't.*

*His legs bent to kneel down next to her body, knees dipping into the blood on the asphalt, but the fluid didn't seep into his dark pants. Kaori's eyes*

caught his. They widened in terror. Raindrops started to fall. Not water, a tar-like liquid. She spasmed, fruitlessly grasping at the emptiness next to her, almost trying to pull away from him. The rain increased, covering her clothes with dark blotches, replacing red with black. Jin stretched out a pale hand that wasn't his. Kaori gave out a gurgling sound, barely forming words. Jin couldn't understand her, but he remembered what she had said. 'I'm sorry'

Jin's hand reached her head. His fingers mixed the dark ink with her blood, drawing symbols he didn't know on her forehead. Kaori's eyes fluttered shut. Her face getting covered more and more in liquid darkness. Still leaning over her, he looked at the empty air opposite of him. The corners of his mouth turned up by a fraction. Fingers stained with blackness tentatively reached out, but then suddenly pulled away. He stood up, took a step back and surveyed the empty street and seemingly dead city. Jin felt himself fall out of his body. It wasn't his body. He fell back, down, the scene in front of him becoming smaller and slowly suffocated by unconsciousness. A grey coloured city raining tar, a mangled body on the ground and a nondescript dark figure standing in the middle. He could hear a cry in the distance.

He took a desperate deep breath. Tears were dampening his face and his throat felt sore. Had he been the one crying out? Sweat was soaking his shirt and boxers, and chilling him to the bone. Images of Kaori crept into his mind. Hurriedly, he got up and patted the wall for the light switch. The brightness hurt his eyes, but it also burned away unwanted memories. His wristwatch on the nightstand said it was 5 am. Shivering, he paced the room, trying to distract himself from his nightmare. If he just waited long enough, it would fade away. He went to the toilet, had a glass of water and changed his clothes, but it wouldn't help. Every dark shadow in the corner of his eyes threatened to bring back the dream. In the end, he watched witless Morning TV in the well-lit living room.

At some point he must've dozed off because the next time he looked at his watch, it was already 11. Groggily, he got up and pulled on his regular clothes. Before going out, he lingered in the doorway and turned back, pondering, then he grabbed Kaori's green jacket and left.

On the way to the Sugisawa Hospital, he stopped at a Seven-Eleven and bought two salmon onigiri that he ate during the drive. It satiated his hunger, but didn't really help with his fatigue.

Walking through the stuffy hospital halls, he wished for this to be the last time he ever had to set foot in this building. He didn't even hesitate at the room door, just strode in, ready to get Kaori out of this place. She was wearing the black turtleneck and blue jeans he had brought her yesterday and already had her sneakers on with the paper bag sitting on the bed. Seemed like he wasn't the only impatient one.

Upon seeing him, she raised an eyebrow, "You look horrible."

"Thanks," he could barely muster a smile. Standing in front of her, he felt thrown back to the first time he had entered this room. So relieved to see her here, in one piece and about to leave this hospital. Impulsively he reached out and pulled her into a hug. He closed his eyes, just feeling the form of Kaori's body, her clothes, her smell shooing away his night terrors. She lightly placed her arms around his hips, which surprised him a little, but put the last fractured piece of his past back in place. How could he have ever even thought about not coming back for her?

"Did you fall asleep on me?" Jin jerked up. She had let him go and one of her fingers was poking into his side. He opened his embrace.

"Sorry, it was a long night," he repressed a yawn. She looked at him amused, while he rubbed his eyes. He held out the jacket. "Thought you might want it. It's a little cold outside."

She just eyed it sceptically, then took it from him with a huff. "Thank you." There was no attempt at putting it on. "Well, let's get going," she said and marched towards the door. Jin took the bag and followed close behind.

There were some more documents Kaori had to put her hanko on in order to officially be discharged. Jin watched her fill out name, date, living address, and phone number on two separate forms. Goosebumps ghosted over his body at seeing the foreign handwriting. It was slanted and jagged, kanjis written in fast sharp strokes. The kind of handwriting you might associate with a doctor. Kaori's hadn't been that neat or pretty either, but it had its own charm with slight curves, broad strokes, and characters that were just tidy enough to stay eligible. He noticed that Matsuo-sensei's name was written under the section for supervising doctor, but the actual release had been signed



by someone else. After the first day, he hadn't seen or heard from the woman again. A few nurses had come by from time to time during his visits, but not her.

Finally out of the hospital, he turned around to Kaori. She had a wry triumphant smile on her face and was taking in the parking lot. "We made it," he laughed, feeling like he just won a marathon.

"We sure did," she retorted in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

"Do you know how to drive a car?" he asked. "I'm dead on my feet and I would prefer not having to concentrate on the street in this state."

"I have memories of it, but I haven't done it myself."

Jin gave her a confused look. "So, that's a yes?"

"Yes. I will have to acquaint myself a bit with it, but I'm a fast learner." Her smile turned sly, "If you trust me not to immediately put you back in that hospital." She pointed to the building behind them.

He laughed nervously, "It's worth a try." She flashed him a grin.

After finding the car and putting their things inside, he gave her his keys in an almost ceremonial fashion. Unconcerned, she took them and walked to the driver's side.

Inside, she rearranged mirrors and the seat before taking her time inspecting the dashboard. Intently she trailed her fingers over the wheel and gear change.

"Are you okay?" he asked, growing a bit concerned.

"Yes yes, just remembering. It's like childhood memories that get triggered by old toys." She turned around to the back seats, an almost lascivious smile slowly creeping across her face. "Lots of memories." Jin felt heat rising to his face. Her gaze burned into his eyes and then slowly wondered down. He grabbed the seatbelt for support. His previous fatigue was forgotten. "Well, let's get going then," she casually turned back to the front and started the engine.

"Seatbelt," Jin whispered, having to clear his throat once before getting a tone out.

She obliged and then steadily maneuvered the car out of the parking

space. Turns out she really was a fast learner. After a few minutes she looked as if she had never done anything else in her life.

“How come that you have never driven a car before?” he asked to fill the silence. His left hand was clutching the door handle, just in case.

She shrugged, one arm leaning next to the window, far too casually for his liking. “It was just never a necessity,” after a pause she continued, “It’s also bad for the environment.”

“How do you get around then?” Realizing that he sounded kind of stupid, he clarified, “I mean, what do you prefer to use instead?”

“Public transport, train, just walk, the options are endless.”

For some reason, Jin felt weird imagining this person just existing in normal society. Walking around in public like everyone else. It had all been so self-contained in his mind. The hospital and everything unnatural that had happened to Kaori had become kind of synonymous. Just get Kaori out of the hospital and everything else would fall into place. Now, doubt was rearing its head inside his mind. He pointedly ignored it. Short term goals. Get Kaori out of the hospital, get her home and then see about everything else. It was the groundwork that everything else would flourish on.

Returning home wasn’t quite how Jin had imagined it. Having Kaori’s physical presence with him again was comforting and it was reassuring to see her back in her own place, but any joy he might take from this was dampened by witnessing her move around in such an uncharacteristic manner. In the hospital he could explain it away with the stench of mortality in the air messing with his senses, but here, in the apartment that they had spent the last 6 years in, the difference was even more jarring.

He stayed close to the entrance, watching her wander through the rooms, inspecting pictures and knick-knacks that had accumulated over the years, picking up things at random, brushing fingertips along the walls and furniture. Like an animal exploring its new habitat.

“I know this place, but it’s different seeing it in person,” she voiced, not really talking to him. She turned back around, “Are you just going

to stand there all day?"

Jin shook himself out of his thoughts and trailed after her into the kitchen. The fridge underwent a critical inspection. "Did you buy groceries even once? There's barely anything left," she chided, "Alone for barely a week, and you stop functioning."

"In my defense, I had to deal with a pretty traumatic event," he retorted. It wasn't like he didn't or couldn't cook, usually he just didn't feel like spending time on it. Take-out was much easier.

"Good that I'm here then," she said and started rummaging around the kitchen. Jin pressed his lips together, not giving an answer. While looking through cupboards and drawers, she unearthed a bag of rice, oil, spices and a pan, and then got a pack of eggs from the fridge.

"What are you doing?" Jin asked, feeling kind of useless.

"Cooking. The hospital food was horrible." A sieve was uncovered.

"You can cook?"

She looked at him in exasperation. "Of course I can cook. I don't think I would've lived this long otherwise. Fried rice doesn't require much skill anyway." She pressed the sieve into his hands. "Wash the rice." It wasn't a request. Jin did as he was told.

It was actually kind of nice cooking together. The casual interaction eased the tension out of his shoulders. Him and Kaori had usually cooked together on the weekends. This didn't have the same carefree atmosphere, but it wasn't unpleasant. He could do this. He could deal with this.

*It was a dim room. Fluorescent light flickering from time to time, making the air colder than it already was. White tiles were covering the walls, and seamless polymer plastic was making the light grey floor slippery. Radiographs of cracked bones and an injured skull were hanging on the negatoscope fixed on the wall. There was a metal surgery table in the middle of the room. A body was lying on top of it, wrapped in the heavy metallic smell of blood. The surgical lamp looming overhead made it look even more sickly. Shadows were barely being held out by the faint glow.*

The body belonged to a woman. Linen was covering her up to her navel, giving her a sliver of decency. Fresh surgical cuts on her arms and ribs were surrounded by bruised purple and dark red flowers. Her eyes were closed. Her chest, unmoving. The top part of her skull, about two centimeters above her eyebrows, had been neatly cut open and removed, now lying on a nearby small table, short black hair dripping over the edges. Her brain was clearly visible, light brown and unnaturally bloodless.

A ticking sound could be heard. Barely audible and fast. Legs, small but in large numbers, gliding over the ground. Low insectoid chirping sounds. They were trickling out of the dark corners. Nine long black chitin bodies with light yellow legs and a crimson head. Their sizes varied. The smallest around a hand's length, the longest the size and width of a man's arm. The centipedes were scurrying around the room, drawing circles around the surgery table. Every now and then, one of them lifted the front part of its body, antenna testing the air, crooked legs stretching to the metal top, trying to find a way up.

One of the smaller ones climbed up the surgical lamp. Others followed, crawling over the woman's legs and hips, towards her head, curiously inspecting the cuts and bruises on her body along the way. Soon, her torso had become a writhing black chitin nest. The largest one slithered up to her chest. It lifted its red head and towered over her, its antenna carefully exploring her face and open brain. It gave a low screech and its companions shot forward, aiming for the exposed organ. Small mouths started nibbling the gray matter. The biggest centipede moved in loops around them. Enclosing them, then settled down and cradled the woman's head almost protectively.

Her entire head was replaced by a pulsing mass of centipedes. Just chirping noises, the ticking of legs on metal and wet fleshy sounds could be heard. After a while, the great Mukade lifted itself up again. The other critters instinctively made room for it. It leaned down and dove right into the center of them all, burrowing itself into the woman's braincase. Further and further, until its last leg had disappeared. The remaining centipedes scrambled. Falling off the table and scurrying back into the dark corners they had come from.

The woman was still lying motionless. Drops of clear fluid trailed down her face. The deep red brain was moving, trembling slightly. Another shiver went through the organ, then the front of the flesh parted, stretching and revealing two rows of teeth. A bloody grin.

Suddenly, the woman's eyes snapped open. Fingers twitched, her chest heaved in shallow breaths. She looked to the side, to the top part of her

*head lying on the table next to her. In an impossibly slow motion, she lifted her arm and reached over. After a failed attempt, she managed to grab the scalp and brought it into her lap. Groaning, she sat up. She lifted the cranium up with both hands, lowering it on her head like a crown, careful not to tangle the hair. The brain was being hidden from view. Meticulously, she aligned both parts of the skull as best as her still slightly uncoordinated movements allowed. Then, she picked needle and thread from another table lined with surgical instruments. Methodically, she sewed both parts of her head back together. When finished, she gave the string a firm tug and put away the needle. For a moment, she just sat there, looking at her hands that were covered in blood and something else. She licked her lips. A grin spread across them, mirroring the brain's.*

*Darkness encroached. Dimming the room, dimming the light until nothing was left.*

Jin opened his eyes. He was shivering. Another nightmare. Would he have to go through this every night? He pulled his covers up to his chin, desperate for some warmth. It barely helped. When he curled in on his side, his gaze landed on the one lying beside him. Kaori. Her hair was tousled and fanned out across her forehead, a few strands covering her eyes, becoming one with her lashes. He edged closer. She had such a relaxed expression on her face. Soft and peaceful. It seemed like forever since he had seen her like this. No fake smile, no crooked sneer, just the gentleness that had pulled him to her all those years ago.

He struggled a bit with the two blankets until he managed to sneak a foot under her covers. It was a lot warmer. More fumbling and he was able to worm his way under the edges of her blanket. She furrowed her brow for a second, but didn't wake. He listened to her even breathing. It was making him sleepy again. Tentatively, he reached out a hand and brushed some hair away from her eyes and behind her ear. The edges of her wound became visible, a black thread peeking out behind her hair. His heartbeat sped up again. Vestiges from his dreams closing in. He turned his eyes away and shuffled closer to the source of the warmth. When he looked up again, he was met with a pair of dark eyes staring down at him, her expression now more emotionless than calm.

"What are you doing?" she murmured.

He slowly recovered from his shock. "I'm cold," he whispered back.

“It’s much warmer here.”

“Not for long,” she grumbled.

Jin licked his lips, “I had a dream.” She furrowed her eyebrows. He didn’t know how much he wanted to tell her. “It was about Kaori’s accident. And her surgery.” He hesitated, “And her death.” It was like an exorcism. As if with every word the memories became less potent.

She studied his face for a while, taking in his words. Then, rolled over on her back and stared up at the ceiling, seemingly wrestling with her thoughts. Closing her eyes, she sighed, “Move over.” He made a questioning sound. “Turn around,” she motioned for him to face away from her. “I don’t want to see that mushy look on your face.”

He obliged and turned back around to his side of the bed. There was some tugging and pulling going on behind him until he was smothered by a warm blanket. Some more movement and then he felt an arm snake around his waist and a dent in the mattress, indicating a body lying close behind him. A smile tugged on his lips, and he stretched out to pull his own cushion closer. Lying comfortably, he slid his hand down Kaori’s arm, until he could intertwine their fingers.

“Don’t push it,” came a mumble from behind him, but there was no attempt at pulling away. Listening to her steady breathing, he gradually drifted into a dreamless sleep.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm taking full advantage of the fact that we don't know yet how the brain transfer works. It's a dream, so things are a little skewed by Jin's subconscious anyway.

The second dream is partly inspired by one of [Karama08's artworks](#)

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Aoba-dori was packed as always. Neverending crowds of people pressed along the streets and through the malls, seeing the weekend as the ideal time to spend their money. The traffic light turned green and Kenjaku watched another bulk of people ferry over the crosswalk, from one Hapina Nakakecho complex to the other. The perfect setting. If you wanted an anonymous conversation that nobody would pay attention to or overhear, crowds were the way to go. That was the reason she preferred Tokyo. Sendai had it's charms, but if you left the city center, the streets became dead quite fast. At least by the standards of a capital city. On the other hand, that solitude allowed you to do certain other things in peace.

Mitakisan Fudoin Temple and Koshiji were close by too, meaning Uraume would look a little less out of place. Said curse user was currently giving her another earful.

"You are taking your sweet time with this," they spat, always so testy in all things concerning Sukuna. Kenjaku was leaning next to the giant gates of the mall, hands in her black hoodie, while Uraume was pacing next to her, not looking very much like a buddhist in everything but clothes.

"Patience patience," she chided. "These things take time."

"You have been here for a month and have done basically nothing except play housewife. You are accustomed to the new body, what are you waiting for," they retorted.

She chuckled, "I thought you were more of a romantic. Do you expect me to just jump his bone and push out the kid? There's no need to rush." She pulled one hand out of the hoodie pocket and started ticking off points with her fingers, "We have to establish a relationship. He needs to trust me. Things have to line up with my period, and for the child to be born on Vernal Equinox Day I have to get pregnant in June, which still leaves me with four months to prepare."

Uraume gave a contemptuous sniff. "This should better work out in

the end then.”

“Of course it will. This is the easiest part,” she gave the other a confident smile.

“I do not like having Sukuna-sama’s return dependent on your skills of seduction,” they glowered.

“Don’t worry, I have a good feeling about Jin.” Kenjaku looked over to a flower shop where a presumed couple was inspecting a vase full of lilies. “He knows I’m not his fiancée and he is to a certain extent aware of who I really am, but hasn’t left,” she leaned her head to the side. “Quite curious.” Jin was obviously disturbed by what he had found out about her, but had made no attempts to run. He seemed kind of dependent on her, be it because of his loyalty to his girlfriend or something else. In any case, it meant he wouldn’t try to leave any time soon.

Uraume furrowed their brows, “He must be quite damaged then. Heavens know, I wouldn’t want to be in a relationship with you.” She gasped in mock hurt. “But don’t get too caught up. I do not want to wait another 400 years for your next shot at Tengen.”

Kenjaku turned serious. “I have located the prison realm. We just have to retrieve it. Losses are to be learned from, and I don’t intend to make the same mistake twice. There is still time to arrange for everything to fall into place. With the defection of Zenin Toji and the development of Geto Suguru’s abilities, we have some new interesting pawns too.” She smiled. “I don’t want to be too optimistic, but things are looking much better than last time.”

Jin immediately saw her as he was walking out of the Don Quijote. Just a few meters away, right between the Hapina Nakakeicho entrance and a flower shop, leaning casually against the building. She seemed to be in a conversation with a young monk. Jin was unsure if they were a boy or a girl. The kid lacked the serenity you would usually expect from the buddhists, and instead showed the typical aggravation of a teenager. Then again, it might just be because of their conversational partner.

Living with her for the last few weeks had been interesting, to put it



mildly. Definitely a new experience. She would disappear at odd times and then come back late in the night. He had no idea where she went. She definitely wasn't working. Sometimes she would pick up the trash on her way out or bring groceries home with her, but it could hardly be what kept her away for so long. When asked, she evaded the question or gave nondescript answers.

When she was there, their time together was usually quite nice, just doing everyday things like cooking, watching TV, playing games or discussing books. As it turned out, her previous comment about being 'pretty good' at Go was a wild understatement. Jin hadn't managed to win against her even once. He was no genius, but he could usually take a round or two against his father. She on the hand, was literally dancing circles - or squares - around him.

There had been some tension in their interactions in the beginning, but he had slowly gotten used to her presence. The wound on her forehead had healed a little more, making it easier for him to look at her. Especially at night, he actually welcomed having her near him. He hadn't suffered from any more nightmares. If that was because of her or just a coincidence, he didn't know, but he wasn't going to question it. This made the nights when she would come back late unbearable. His mind needed sleep, but he didn't dare to relax, afraid that his subconscious would have him relive Kaori's death again. So he tossed and turned until he heard footsteps, felt the dipping of the mattress, and an arm around his body.

She had left around noon, as usual not saying where she was going or when she would be coming back. He had assumed that she was going somewhere outside the city on these occasions, maybe into the nearby mountains. It seemed like the ideal spot for being secretive. So it surprised him to see her here, right in the city center, among so many people. After some hesitation, he walked over to her. She noticed him after his first few steps.

"Jin. What are you doing here?" she said cheerfully, when he joined the two.

He lifted up his bag. "I bought a Shogi set at Donki."

She peered into the bag. "An animal edition. How quaint."

The teenage monk was staring at Jin, he was unsure if it would be better to introduce himself or ignore them. Kids that age were so hard to figure out. He already dreaded the day his own child would reach

that stage of life.

Kaori made a grand motion towards them, “May I introduce you to Uraume, an old friend of mine.”

Jin’s heart stumbled a little in his ribcage. He looked at her in surprise, then back at the not-actually teenager.

“I wouldn’t call us friends,” they mumbled, eyes still boring into Jin.

“They have been dying to meet you,” not-actually Kaori continued, unperturbed.

So there were more. More people similar to the person he had been living with for the past month. Was this one also inhabiting a body that wasn’t theirs? He couldn’t see any scars, but maybe there were different ways of doing it. ‘Old friend’ implied that they must be around the same age, so at least 500 years old. Far from a kid.

“Uhm, nice to meet you,” he stuttered, his palms became sweaty.

The corners of Uraume’s mouth turned down, “He looks a little puny. Are you sure it will work with him?” That was rude. But he kept his mouth shut. Despite their skinny frame, he was sure he didn’t want to find out what they were capable of.

The other stepped next to him and snaked an arm around his waist. “He has it, where it counts,” she said in a surprisingly serious tone, “Physicality is irrelevant for now.”

Uraume crossed their arms and leaned back slightly. “There is a certain optical similarity, but most of it is just the hair,” they judged.

“I have done my research,” the other retorted, “Otherwise, I would’ve moved on already. Together with me, it will have the desired effect. You know this is my specialty. Why are you so doubtful?”

The monk now fixated her. “We are talking about Sukuna-sama’s return. I don’t want this to become another one of your whimsical experiments that gets left behind in the dust of time.” Jin felt like cattle, trapped between two bargainers.

She dropped her arm and stepped away from Jin. “I don’t see, what result you are trying to gain with your questioning. Sukuna’s return isn’t only important to you. I wouldn’t risk our plan out of simple curiosity. You know that.”

There was tension in the air. Goosebumps trickled over Jin's arms. The two exchanged an unspoken challenge. Then, Uraume sighed and held up their hands in defeat or apology. "You're right. We are at a crucial point, which has me a little on edge. He is not quite what I expected, but I trust your judgement."

She smiled, satisfied. "Good. Then I see you around." The monk nodded, gave Jin a last glance, and then started walking down the street. They were soon swallowed up by the crowd.

He wasn't quite sure what had just happened, and if the outcome was in his favour or not. There was something going on that was far bigger than him and his life's struggles, and he was supposed to play a part in it. It most likely concerned the plan the one currently inhabiting Kaori's body had laid out for humanity. The plan their child had a role to play in. The thought, that he might have gotten involved in something that outreached his own experiences and goals in life, that he was just one tiny helpless cog in a giant ancient machine, was suffocating him.

The one fueling that machine turned around to him again. "Let's get going too. Unless you have something else to take care of?"

Jin shook himself out of his daze. "Uh no, I have everything."

She gave him her usual warm smile that never managed to soften her eyes, "Lead the way then."

"You are coming with me?" he asked.

"There's nothing else for me to do here," she shrugged, "Might as well go home together."

If he was just a small insignificant part, did he really need to understand the bigger picture? Wouldn't it be enough to focus on himself and try to get the best out of this situation? It would all lead to the same thing: a life and a family with Kaori, and that was all he ever wanted.

Ever since the confrontation over the medical report, Jin had had only sparse contact with his father. The man just couldn't understand

how his son could live together with a shadow of his fiancée. Initially, he wanted to give his father some space, but now he felt like it was time to extend an olive branch. That was the reason he had bought the Shogi set. He had often played the game with his father, up until young adulthood, then never found the time for it, diverting to Go, which was easier and cheaper to procure. Since all three of them knew how to play Shogi, it could function as a nice bonding experience. Make his father realise that although what happened with Kaori was strange, he was still just dealing with a more or less normal human being. So it was decided that his father would come over the next day.

In the evening, he was sitting in bed, pondering again over the conversation he had witnessed this afternoon and his curious relationship with the person lying next to him. She was currently working her way through Kaori's Murakami collection at an incredible pace. It all seemed so normal, so ordinary. Both of them being so close together, her reading, a comfortable silence between them. Just as you would expect with any couple. But he doubted that would ever really be the case. It would - could - never be the same relationship he had had with Kaori.

His gaze must've been more intense than he thought because she looked up from the collection of short stories. "Something the matter?" she asked in a neutral tone.

"I've been wondering," he started slowly, glancing up to the healing wound before meeting her eyes again, "Is there still something left of Kaori?"

She raised an eyebrow, "I already told you, her memories-"

"I know," Jin interjected, "I mean," he was searching for words, "Is there something of her presence still left? Like, inside you?"

After studying him a little longer, she gave a thoughtful hum and closed the book, putting it back on the nightstand. "Well, there isn't a second mind or a voice inside me if that's what you're thinking of," her focus turned inwards, "It's more like impulses or reflexes. Similar to the memories that come to the forefront, when I see objects that left a strong impression on her. Certain scenarios can trigger reactions from me, that aren't my own or a particular phrasing can sneak into my speech, even though I normally wouldn't use it." She turned her head to him and thoughtfully ran a finger along his arm. "A lot of it is connected to you. She really loved you a lot."

Tears were piercing Jin's eyes, but he fought them down. How much of her words and actions in the past had been Kaori and how much the one controlling her body? He slid down the headboard to be on eyelevel with her, holding himself up with his elbows. "So she has some influence on you?"

"I wouldn't go that far," she answered evenly, "It's something that comes with my ability and over the years it has become quite easy for me to just repress these reflexes if they bother me. Nothing of it is strong enough to influence my decisions or actions in major ways," her finger trailed up to his shoulder, "It's interesting though, to experience what she valued or had a strong bond with."

But nonetheless, this meant that as long as her body was alive, Kaori was still with him in a way, be it ever so minor. Her love was still there. He would just have to arrange himself with having another person holding the reins on her body. His eyes trailed up to her forehead again. Tentatively, he brushed a fingertip over the stitches. She made no move to stop him. "What happened to your original body?"

Her eyes followed his finger, as it traced across her forehead. "It's long gone."

"You don't miss it?"

"No. I never felt a particular attachment to it," her voice betrayed no feelings.

"But isn't it harrowing to never have a body that is your own? To always borrow from someone else?" he furrowed his brow. Just imagining walking around in some other man's skin freaked him out. Not to mention doing it for years on end, and having nothing to go back to.

"I can make them my own," she said, far too casually.

Jin was brushing his fingertip right above her wound, feeling the difference between the threads of the stitches and the smooth skin between them. "Do you have any preferences for who you take over?"

"Cleanliness," she smirked, "Otherwise it just depends on how I'm feeling and whatever is most convenient for me."

"So you would even take over the body of a man?"

“I would and I have.” She watched his expression closely.

He halted his fingers exploration. “Are you...a woman?” For some reason, he had never thought of that question. When understanding that he was dealing with a human, he also had assumed that this human was female. Never even doubted it.

The smile below him broadened. “At the moment, yes.”

“But not always?”

“I have been a man, a woman, both, neither, and others. These things change. For me at least. Uraume for example doesn’t identify with any gender, and that has always been the case, just like you always identified as male. For me it’s a little different,” she patiently explained.

Jin furrowed his brows, trying to emphasize with that sentiment. “Is it because of your ability?”

She hummed. “Good question. What came first, my ability or my identity? My gender can align with the sex of the body I have, like right now, but it doesn’t have to, and the ability I have can help me express my current gender. Unfortunately, sometimes I have to lower my sights and go with whatever is available or needed at the moment.” He was still trying to work through this new revelation. His confusion seemed to amuse her. “Does this bother you?”

He stared into the middle distance. Jin had wondered about Uraume’s gender identity, but because they also appeared androgynous, he hadn’t questioned it. The existence of people, whose gender didn’t align with their body was something he was vaguely aware of, but this was the first time he was really confronted with this reality. It was also the first time he had heard of someone’s gender changing or being flexible. But did it bother him? Really, he thought it wasn’t his business to judge others identity. When he thought about it, he had always loved Kaori for who she was, unrelated to her gender or sex, and while he definitely thought her attractive as she was now, he probably would’ve been pulled to her even if she had been a man. Then again, this wasn’t Kaori, and he wasn’t sure what feelings he had for her.

“No, I don’t think so. It’s just surprising.” He absentmindedly continued grazing his fingers over her forehead.

She closed her eyes. “That’s nice.”

He leaned his head on his unoccupied hand, chewing over his thoughts. What were his feelings for her? She was certainly strange and not like anybody he had ever known. She frightened him sometimes, but then there was also the mundane reality of living with her. Doing dishes together, going grocery shopping, sitting in front of the TV while eating snacks. It was hard to tell which was more real, her looking groggy in the morning and fighting with the malfunctioning rice cooker or her talking about how their child would help bring humanity to it's undefined 'true purpose'. Truth was, he actually enjoyed her company, unsettling as it could be at times. At least he had someone by his side.

His finger traced down her forehead, bumping over the healing cut. Her breath hitched for a second. He lifted his head. After a blink of hesitation, he leaned down and pressed a soft kiss on her lips. Only for a moment. When he pulled away, he stared into her dark eyes. He licked his lips quickly, and after not feeling any repulsion or apprehension well up within him, he gave it another try.

This time he tried not to concentrate on the similarities with experiences he'd had with Kaori, but instead focused on the differences, what was unique. She was clearly very experienced. Knew what she wanted and how she could get it, subtly trying to coax more out of him. Her hands lifted to his head and wandered through his hair, stroking down his neck from time to time. He leaned on one arm, and cupped her cheek with the other hand. While he knew her taste and body, the way she moved, gave it a new intimacy. It was easy to get swept up in it all. In his exuberance, he felt like attempting something else again. He pulled her lip between his teeth, and while he didn't want to draw blood as she had done before, he did apply some more pressure than he usually would.

He felt her chuckle. "Someone is getting adventurous," she teased, when they seperated.

Jin hummed. "I wanted to try something new." Though that wasn't just related to the more forceful kissing method. He rolled over to his side of the bed again. While fixating on the ceiling, he mindlessly tipped his finger against his lips. Definitely different from Kaori. It had been nice, he had liked it. Should he feel guilty? Was this cheating? This was technically Kaori, right? Though there were a lot of arguments to be made for the case that it wasn't. Surely, there would have been one of those reflexes or impulses, if Kaori would have objected? And with how close they had been, he would've felt something. Right?

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other push herself up on one elbow. "That's it?" she complained. He looked over to her. She actually looked bewildered. It was kind of cute. "The whole conversation you tease me along, and then you just roll over and go to sleep?"

"That wasn't my intention," he apologized, giving her an awkward smile. "There's just a lot on my mind."

She huffed and scooted over to him. "You've done enough thinking for today. Leave that to me." She climbed on top of him and straddled his hips. "I know you enjoyed that. Why stop before the real fun begins?"

Jin was suddenly feeling a bit bashful. "Well yes, it was good."

"Then why stop?" she accused, slowly closing the distance between them again.

"It's just," he was struggling for words, "I'm not sure, if this is right."

"Does it feel wrong?" she asked in a low voice, caressing his shoulders and chest.

"Well no-," he started, not sure how he wanted to end the sentence.

She proceeded to put tingling kisses up and down his neck. "You need more excitement in your life, Jin." His fingers got intertwined with hers, and she lifted one of his hands to her hips. "All that worrying will make you age horribly."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. Maybe he was overthinking this whole thing. The heat from his face started to spread to the rest of his body and it was getting hard to think about who he was and wasn't with, and who he should and shouldn't do these things with. Jin stroked his hand over her back, hiking up her shirt a little, and stretched his neck to allow her better access. Kisses got intermingled with tongue and teeth, making his heart speed up. He was definitely overthinking this.

Oral sex wasn't something he had done much in the past. Kaori had been uncomfortable with the sensation and had a more sensitive gag reflex, so the times they had done it could be counted on one hand. Things were evidently different now. He was too exhausted to ponder how that was possible and the potential implications of it.



Jin didn't regret his decision. It had been fascinating to see the other lose her iron control, even if just in the heat of the moment, allowing her to become more vulnerable. Hearing her breathe his name in a way he wasn't used to hearing, sounding almost rapacious. His head was resting on her bare torso, hearing her heartbeat slow down to an even and steady thump again. Lazily, he drew senseless lines over her stomach, while enjoying the sensation of her playing with his hair. Coming down from his high, he thought that if this was, what the future held for him, he could live with it.

The next day, Jin decided to wear a thin turtleneck and a sweater over it. No need to give his father any unnecessary ideas or potential for complaints. He felt a headache coming on already, but he told himself that there was no reason to worry. Yet. His father probably wouldn't embrace Kaori with open arms, but hopefully he could at least keep his judgement and unnecessary worrying to a minimum.

"Please try to be nice. We want to put him at ease, not burn any bridges," he sighed.

Kaori gave him an innocent smile. "Of course. I'll be the picture of hospitality."

He gave her a wry smile. "Thanks."

Jin kept nervously pacing around the apartment, feeling thrown back into his teenage years, when he first introduced Kaori to his father. Though back then his father had been way less harsh about his new girlfriend. But to be fair, his fiancée wasn't the same anymore, technically a new person. Said fiancée just sat on the sofa, reading, seeming completely unbothered. Finally, the bell rang and Jin hurried to the door, while she casually closed her book and slowly followed him.

There was already tension on his father's face, when he came in. After taking off his shoes and hanging up his coat, his father just stood by the entrance, staring past Jin at the person leaning against the wall of the hallway.

"I see your injuries-," his gaze flickered up to her forehead, "Most of you injuries have healed." He stated darkly. She just gave him a smile

as a reply. "But you are not her. Even if you replicated her face, you will never be her."

She sighed. "I'm not trying to be," she shot Jin a quick glance, "Not anymore, at least."

His father's eyes narrowed. "So you are not even pretending."

She just shrugged. Jin felt the need to de-escalate. "Dad, stop standing around in the hallway and come inside." For emphasis, he took his arm and steered the older man to the living room. Then he made him sit down on the sofa, and put the new Shogi set on the low table in front of him. "I thought we could play a little, like we used to."

The man leaned forward and opened the packaging. He raised an eyebrow, "An animal version? Isn't this for kids?"

"It has all the pieces and a wooden board," Jin defended himself, "I just thought it would be fun."

"I think it's kind of cute," Kaori backed him up, turning a pawn painted with a grey bunny between her fingers. He gave her a thankful smile.

His father's face softened a bit. "It would be nice to play together again. It's been too long." He glanced over to Kaori. "Can't hurt to try."

To make his father feel more comfortable and make him warm up to the whole situation, Jin decided it would be best if he started. He sat down in the armchair opposite his father. Kaori perched herself on the armrest next to him, mutely watching the two men play. At least that's what she did in the beginning. As the game went on, she grew increasingly restless, sighing, pinching the bridge of her nose, clicking her tongue. After a while even Jin could tell that he was very clearly losing. There were only ten pieces left on the board. He reached across the board to take his father's lance, a horse, with his crane rook. She buried her face in her hand.

"Do you want to help me?" he offered, not making his move yet.

She lifted her head again, glancing at his father before simply saying, "Bishop to 4c."

Jin frowned at the board, counting the lines to find out where 4c was. "But then—"

“Hush,” she commanded. He hushed. Without further complaints, he moved the tiger piece to its sacrificial death. As expected, his father immediately took it with his king. The older man gave Kaori a challenging smirk. She didn’t seem concerned. “Crane to 4a and promote,” she instructed. He did as told and turned the piece over to reveal a dragon, effectively challenging his father’s king. The other man grit his teeth and moved his piece to the only free field. She leaned back with a smug smile. “Tiger to 4b and promote.”

After moving the remaining bishop into place and turning it over, Jin studied the board, his father did too. His eyes widened. “I won,” he exclaimed, grinning at his father and grabbing her arm in excitement. “How did you do that?”

She shrugged, “You weren’t necessarily losing, just making a lot of stupid decisions and staunchly refusing to take any opportunity for victory.”

His smile brightened, “Good that I have you then.”

Her expression turned sly and she chuckled, “Yes.”

The man on the other side of the table coughed. He was fixating Kaori. “How about you play against me yourself then?”

She looked at Jin. He stood up and indicated for them to switch places. “As you wish,” she replied lightly and took her seat in the armchair.

They set up the pieces again. Sitting opposite each other, legs spread and elbows resting on their legs, Jin got the vision of two rival yakuza bosses trying to mark their territory. Settled high on the armrest, he had a good vantage point and could observe the game over Kaori’s shoulder. The two took their time, carefully testing each other, pushing forward, just to see how the other would react. There weren’t many words exchanged, but even without studying the board, Jin could tell how things were going by the way a satisfied look slowly spread across his father’s face. After 45 minutes he called checkmate, looking very pleased with himself.

Kaori leaned back on the chair again, stretching her arms a little. “Congratulations. I don’t think there was anything I could’ve done in the end.”

Apparently that wasn’t the reaction his father had expected. His expression faltered a little. She watched him with interest as he turned

back to the game. Grey eyebrows pulled together like dark storm clouds. "You let me win."

She held up her hands in defence, "I only gave you one opportunity and it's impressive that you were able to notice and take advantage of it. That takes skill." Jin figured that this was probably her way of trying to make peace with the man, but it had the opposite effect.

The other hastily arranged the pieces to their original positions again. "Let's do it again," he said, "This time take me seriously. Don't hold back."

She hummed. "Okay. Then I'll let you make the first move."

"I don't need your charity," he bit out.

"As you wish," she sighed, "It's your loss."

It was. The game was over before it had even really begun. Checkmate in eight turns. "You wanted me to be serious," she pointed out. His father had to suffer three more humiliating losses before he gave up. "It's just a matter of experience, don't beat yourself up over it," she said in a sweet voice.

The dinner afterwards was awkward, but Jin had to admit that his father kind of walked into that out of his own volition. When he got a minute alone with him in the kitchen, he tried to mellow the creases. "You have to admit, she isn't so bad. Losing to her might sting, but she actually tried to be nice to you. She's not doing anything harmful."

His father glowered at the glass he was currently wiping down. "They haven't done anything for now, but I still can't say I support what you're doing here." He put the glass away. "You don't really know who that is, even if they are human, and you don't know why they are here. It's effectively a stranger. How is that supposed to ease my worry."

"Well, I do know why she's here, and I found out a little bit about her past," Jin said slowly.

The other raised an eyebrow. "Really. So what's their goal. What do they want with you."

"Uhm, you see," he was trying to find the right words, make things sound as normal as possible. "She wants a family," he finally settled for.

He got a disbelieving look for his effort. "A family?" his father repeated. "For what?"

"What does it matter?" Jin evaded.

"Don't play coy with me, son, you know something is wrong. I haven't interacted much with them, but they sure don't seem like someone looking to settle down and grow tomatoes with you."

"I know I know," he said, "But this is a chance to have a child with Kaori, like we always wanted."

"You want to have a child with that?" his father spluttered. Jin tried to motion for him to keep his voice down. It wasn't helping. "Are you out of your mind? Does nothing about this look like a red flag to you?"

Jin sighed. Why did all their conversations have to end like this. "I told you before, I don't care. This is my life, and I got the chance to have the family I always hoped for. Actually, the more time I spend with her, the more secure I feel in that decision." That wasn't quite true, but he was sick of having to defend himself to his father.

"Is there a problem?" a voice intoned behind him. Kaori was leaning against the doorframe of the kitchen, a knowing smile on her lips.

His father didn't answer. He threw his tea towel on the counter and stalked to the apartment door, his son on his heels. "Talk to me, when you have come back to your senses," he said, fixating his son with an intense glare. The door slammed shut, and the couple was left alone in their apartment again.

Jin threw Kaori an exhausted look. "I tried to play nice," she defended, holding up her hands in a show of innocence.

"I know," Jin heaved a sigh, pushing up his glasses to rub his eyes. "It's fine, it wasn't your fault. He will calm down eventually. He has to get used to it one way or another." One corner of her mouth lifted up in smug self-satisfaction.

They walked back to the kitchen, to take care of the rest of the dishes. Jin dried them off, while Kaori stacked them and put them in the cupboards. He had just finished wiping the last cup dry, when he saw a long stain on the wall over the sink, too thick to be a simple crack in the wall. It surely hadn't been there before, he would've noticed it. Suspicious, he got closer to scrutinise it more. His body moved on

instinct. Before he knew it, he had backed away to the other side of the room, as far away from the sink as possible. It was a centipede, he now consciously realized, and it was moving, crawling further down to the table. Unwanted images he had worked long to repress, made their comeback. Chitin writhing over a corpse. A red head burrowing itself into the cavern of an empty body. No, he had to shake himself out of it. This was a mountain region, it wasn't unusual to find the critters here. He had killed dozens of them before. It was big, about as long as Jin's hand, but nothing compared to the ones from his nightmares. Still, he looked around for a weapon.

"What's the matter?" Kaori asked, turning away from the cupboard.

He pointed in the general direction of the detestable insect, "Centipede"

She followed his pointing finger. "Ah. A Mukade," she said, walking closer with interest glimmering in her eyes.

Jin's gaze fell on a wooden cutboard. This would have to do. He grabbed it, holding it in front of him like a shield and sneaked back to the sink.

"Don't," she warned, putting out her arm in front of him, when she saw his feeble plan of attack, "If you kill one, more will come. There are usually at least two, a female and a male. You'll only stain the wall."

"What should we do then? I'm not letting it crawl around in here. Who knows where it will turn up next," he shuddered. Kaori walked closer and put her hand against the wall, close to the Mukade, but not in a way that she would corner it. "Are you insane? It will bite you," he hissed, quiet as if afraid that the critter would hear his warning and get ideas.

"It's not that big." Jin disagreed. "This one is most likely the male. They aren't as aggressive as the bigger, female ones. And their bite isn't deadly," she calmly explained.

"It can still put you in the hospital," he muttered.

"Don't threaten it, and it won't hurt you. Let it come to you." That was exactly what he tried to avoid. He watched in horror, as the centipede crawled closer to her hand, curiously exploring her skin. Jin had to turn away, pressing a hand to his mouth. Memories were making him feel dizzy. The phantom smell of old blood and

disinfectant suffocated him. When he had gathered himself again and looked up to her, the damned thing was sitting on her hand. Yellow legs were tightly clinging to her knuckles and a red head was stretching towards the eyes that were examining the creature. Human and Mukade appeared fascinated by one another. It was sickening.

“Please bring it at least outside,” he urged her, “I’m not against pets, but I would prefer a cat.” The attempt to mask his discomfort with humor wasn’t very successful.

The centipede drew a few more circles around her hand and then made its way up her arm, struggling over the creases of her shirt. She was still watching it with keen eyes, like it was a rat in a maze and she was interested in studying if it could find its way out. “I’m begging you,” he implored again, “Get rid of it.” Still no reaction. The Mukade reached her neck and started climbing up to her cheek. “If you don’t throw that thing out right now, I’m never touching you again.”

That got her attention. She looked up, taking in his desperate expression, and huffed. Carefully, she picked the creature up with two fingers and put it back on her hand before it could reach her cheekbones. “Sorry. They’re just such a fascinating species.” Kaori walked to the door that led to the small balcony that was connected to the kitchen. Jin made sure to keep a few meters of distance between them. She opened the door. “Did you know, that they can form bonds? If one dies, the others will come looking for it. I’m not sure, if they can grieve, but the death of one has an effect on their group dynamic and productivity.”

“So, you think there are more in here?” he asked.

“No. This one was probably lost, looking for its companions,” she replied casually. When she opened the door, letting in a gust of fresh air, the centipede seemed to understand where its journey was going and excitedly lifted its front most body up in the air. She pressed her hand next to the balcony railing and watched it slither its way to freedom. Jin stayed uncomfortably by the door. The creature crawled down the railing and disappeared somewhere below their apartment.

Kaori turned to him with a smile. “See? Completely harmless.” For emphasis, she spread her Mukade-less hand in front of his face. “You are much bigger and scarier from the animal's perspective.”

“Sure.” He wasn’t convinced. Jin shut the door tightly.

Kaori stepped closer to him, and with slow movements, as if not to

scare him, she placed the hand that had held the Mukade on his cheek. "If you don't harm them, they won't harm you." She caressed his cheek, thumb brushing along his facial bones. "Such a simple rule, but so hard to follow."

*He was sitting on the ground, surrounded by blackness. Gray light only allowed him to see a few meters ahead. The ground was made out of a substance he couldn't identify. It was solid and dark, but not stone or asphalt. A light breeze was ghosting around him, directionless, coming from everywhere and nowhere. When he turned around, he saw a familiar figure sitting cross legged a couple of steps away. Jin hurried over to her, stumbling over his own feet. She was staring up into the unending darkness.*

*'Kaori,' he breathed. It was her, the real Kaori, unchanged and unhurt. No scar on her forehead, and no injuries.*

*She lowered her gaze to him and smiled. 'Jin' Such a soft smile. Warm, familiar eyes, welcoming him, letting him know everything was alright.*

*He fell on his knees, touching her face, her shoulders, bringing her in close. 'It's really you.' His tears were covering both their faces in salty water.*

*'Of course it is.' She returned his hug, slowly stroking his back in circles, trying to calm him down.*

*They sat together for a while, he didn't know how long. It was hard to measure time in this place. Nothing moved, the light didn't alter. The silence was only breached by Jin's occasional sniffles. Kaori was sitting between his legs, head resting against his shoulders. Just being here with her was enough for him. He didn't need to know where they were or how long they had been here, all that mattered was that they were together.*

*At first, he didn't notice the shapes appearing around them. Dark shadows wavering in and out of his field of vision. Only when their physicality became more solid, did he reluctantly pry his eyes away from his fiancée and looked around. The figures shaped themselves into people. Hundreds of them. Standing around them and watching them. Slowly drawing closer, building a ring that grew tighter and tighter. Some of them appeared more modern, but most were dressed in some type of ancient attire. Japan's history was spread out around them. Men, women, those whose gender he couldn't discern. Peasants, monks, merchants, nobles. They were all united*



*by a faint scar across their forehead.*

*The crowd parted. Through them came a person dressed in flowing white robes that were covering their feet, making it seem as if they were floating. Long black hair was waving around them, testing the air like a snake's tongue. Their face was painted white. Enticing, but with an apathetic expression. Cool black eyes fixated the couple. Their brows had been shaved off. A faint red mouth provided the only spec of colour.*

*Their mask-like facial features were abruptly cut off, right above where their eyebrows would have been. The brain was clearly visible, no bone and flesh there to hide it from sight. It was leering down at him, it's ghastly grin coloured pink by blood. Cerebrospinal fluid was running down their face, slightly smudging their makeup. Jin felt Kaori go slack in his arms. He looked down. Her head had lolled to the side, eyes turned inside her head, only the white of her eyeballs visible. Her mouth was ajar. And her head, the top of her head was missing. Merely a hollow crater where her scalp should've been. Jin screamed. The sight was horrifying, repulsive, but still, he didn't want to let her go. Desperate, he held onto her limp body, trying to stroke life into it.*

*The wraithlike person stopped in front of him. Looming over him and Kaori. Their lips parted in a grin that mirrored their brains, showing black dyed teeth. A contortion in crimson and coal. They stretched out a hand towards the two.*

*'You will do nicely.'*

*Jin shuddered. His shoulders were shaking violently.*

His eyes snapped open. Someone was shaking him. Kaori. A bright red line stretching across her forehead, but alive. Jin fell forward into her arms. "It's you," he whispered. "You're here."

"Of course, I am," she mumbled back.

He seperated a little from her, to take in his surroundings. The bedroom was lightly illuminated by his bedside lamp. Outside the window was only the polluted darkness of Sendai. The clock on his nightstand showed that it was a little after 1 am. Kaori was still in her regular clothes, sweater and jeans, and sitting on the edge of his side of the bed.

"You are back late," he accused, his arms loosely locked around her

waist, he rested his head on her shoulder.

“Sorry, I had a long way to travel,” she smiled, her eyes unreadable.

He didn’t even bother to ask where she had been. She wouldn’t tell him anyway. “Thank you for waking me up.” She gave a hum that reverberated through his head. “That was the first nightmare in two months. I thought they had stopped.”

“You must still be subconsciously working through your grief. That’s why you have these dreams. Your mind is trying to help you,” she said, sounding more like she was theorizing to herself.

“I wish it would stop doing that,” Jin sighed.

“That is up to you.”

He huffed, “And you. I never get them, if you’re sleeping next to me.”

She gave him a funny look. “I think working through your stress would be the healthier approach.” He grumbled noncommittally. She poked at his arms. “Would you let me get changed?”

He strengthened his embrace around her. “No.”

She chuckled. “Really, this will be much more comfortable, if I have less clothes on.”

Jin let himself fall back on the bed, using motive force to pull her on top of him. “Later.” She groaned, but made no move to free herself. The weight on his body was comforting. Her hair was tickling him under his chin. He pressed his face into it. His hands roamed around her back, assuring himself that she was still here. Under his palms, he could feel her ribcage slightly expanding with every breath. So easy, so natural, as if it had never been any different, never stopped. Jin closed his eyes. Felt her soft hair against his cheek and the curves of her body press into his.

After a few minutes, Kaori struggles a bit in his grip to get enough room to put her legs on the bed. She wiggled her arms free, and grasped his shoulders. Now, their bodies were pressed fully against each other, fitting perfectly together. “I can hear your heartbeat speeding up,” she said, voice muffled by his t-shirt.

Jin didn’t reply and just hiked her sweater up a little, so he could freely caress her back with his fingers. She gave a satisfied sigh, her

breath creating a hot spot on his t-shirt. Her warm skin was comforting. The tangible reality of it banished the last traces of his nightmare. They just needed to stay together a little longer. A little longer and he could forget about it all. Forget all his troubles, second thoughts, worries, and nightly terrors.

With time, his hands traveled from her back to her waist, trailing up and down the sides of her body. Kaori lifted her head a little, and placed velvety kisses along his neck. Her hands slid under his top and explored the flesh underneath, faintly grazing his nipples with a fingertip. She distributed her weight to the side, to allow both of them better access. His hands moved over her chest, cupping the slight swell of her breasts. He pecked kisses across her forehead, black stitches scratching his lips. A faint bitter and sour taste sneaking into his mouth. Their breathing sped up in tandem. Without words, both of them got up into a sitting position again. Jin pulled off her sweater and shirt, while she did the same for him. All of it got thrown into the darkness outside the bed, forming a pile on the ground that someone could trip over in the morning.

He opened her jeans and slid a hand down. Kaori pressed her brow into his shoulder, panting heated breaths against his skin. One of her hands raked through his hair, slightly pulling on it, while the other pressed up against his boxer shorts. Her hips started moving in time with his hand. Jin could feel finger disentangle from his hair, and then nails raking over his back. She didn't stop there, lifting her head again, and biting into the crook of his neck. It hurt, but by now he knew how to move past the pain, and find the pleasure. His hips sought out the pressure of her touch. He started kissing down her neck, tasting her skin with his tongue.

Suddenly, she pulled away from him. "Wait," her voice was hoarse, shaking a little. She dragged his hand out of her pants, ignoring his protests, and got out of his lap. A trickle of clear fluid trailed down her forehead. Distracted, she wiped it away with the back of her hand. First, she struggled out of her jeans and underwear, and made them join the mess on the floor. Fully naked, she crawled over to her side of the bed, and opened her nightstand. After some rummaging around in the drawer, she brought a square silver package to light.

Jin raised an eyebrow, "I thought pregnancy was the one thing that we didn't need to worry about. Isn't that the whole reason you're here?"

She came back over to him. "Not yet. There's still time." With a smirk

she snapped the rubber band of his boxers, shaking the crinkling condom package playfully. “Don’t you want to have some fun without needing to think about kids?” He got her drift and rid himself of his last piece of clothing. Kaori placed herself on his legs again, hands sliding down to his hips. “Now, where were we?”

## Chapter End Notes

This is the first time I'm writing something this smutty, so please bear with me...

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*This love is about to carry me off somewhere. The current's too overpowering; I don't have any choice. It may very well be a special place, some place I've never seen before. Danger may be lurking there, something that may end up wounding me deeply, fatally. I might end up losing everything. But there's no turning back. I can only go with the flow. Even if it means I'll be burned up, gone for ever.*

Jin dropped the book on his face. He was lying on the sofa, head in Kaori's lap, trying his best to read and actually enjoy *Sputnik Sweetheart*. After getting it recommended to him by both of them, he had kind of felt obligated to give it a try. Usually, he was more of a casual reader of Murakami, picking up whatever his fiancée recommended to him, but not actually following his creative career. The lamentations of depressed men about their sex life got a little draining over time.

This book was hitting a little too close to home for his liking though. The other Kaori had said he could learn something from this. Was this what she had meant? Was she his Miu, his *Sputnik Sweetheart*? Would he too disappear in the end, chasing after the dream of a woman that never really existed or was long gone? The shell of the woman that once was, changing him into something unlike him, forcing both of them into despair. If he was Sumire, that would make the narrator...his father? Trying to find his son, who had gone off with a stranger he didn't know.

No. He was reading too much into it. Jin was nothing like Sumire. He might be a bit of a cloudchaser, but that's where the similarities ended. He didn't see himself running off in search for...what? Another version of Kaori? One that was still unchanged by the accident? He was more of a realist. He had learned to arrange himself with what he had. Clutch what was left of her, and make the most out of it. Then the story also kept harping on about sexual desire and the lack thereof, in true Murakami fashion. Definitely not something he had to care about.

Jin lifted the book from his face again, and looked up to the person he was currently sharing his life with. She had a clipboard clasp in one

arm, and was filling pages upon pages with chicken scratch. A slight crease had edged between her eyebrows. He had no idea what she was scribbling. From his vantage point it was impossible to read, even if you disregarded her handwriting.

“Say, why did you recommend this book to me?” he spoke into the silence, shaking the novel for emphasis.

Her hand didn’t still, she didn’t look up, her expression didn’t change. “I thought you might find some connection to the topics discussed in it,” she said in an uninflected voice.

“So, are you Miu?” he pondered, testing how she would react to his previous thoughts.

“If that’s what you are taking from it,” she threw him a quick glance, “But I know the difference between Sputnik and Beatnik. So I can’t be your Sputnik Sweetheart.” One corner of her lips twitched in a familiar smirk.

“Of course, that’s the main difference between you two,” he joked.

She turned back to her writing. “Going with your metaphor, wouldn’t Kaori be your Miu?” Her voice was detached again, simply indulging him in his ruminations. “You would be chasing after her, not me, right?”

Jin blinked, retracing his past thoughts. “Yes,” he said slowly. “I guess you’re right.” If there was no connection between them, if this person above him was inhabiting some other body, there would be no reason to stay with her. Since he didn’t have the benefit of alternate universes like the book characters, he would just have to move on with his life. He tried to imagine it. It would be just like after the accident. Nobody there to come home to. Nobody to casually spend the evening with. He would need to get a smaller bed or a futon. There was still his father, his colleagues, and old childhood friends. He would have to fully lean on them in times of need.

The book flobbed to the ground, when Jin sat up, blinking away the stars that danced at the corner of his vision for a moment. Without much consideration, he left it where it was. Maybe he would find the will to continue it at some point, but definitely not any time soon.

“What are you writing?” he edged closer to her.

“Instructions,” was all he got.

“For what?”

“Upcoming events.”

“What events?”

“You don’t need to know.” So far, her patience seemed to be holding up.

He squinted at what she tried to pass off as words. It looked strange. Stranger than usual. There were no kanjis as far as he could tell, just hiragana and katakana, all flowing together, looking kind of warped. Maybe it was for a foreigner. But then, wouldn’t you at least try to keep your characters readable?

“Your handwriting is horrible,” he commented. No reaction. “That doesn’t even look like Japanese.”

“It’s not.” She hit her pen on the clipboard a few times, as if to spur on her thoughts, and then continued her scribbling.

Jin’s eyebrows shot up. Intrigued, he leaned his head this way and that, trying to match what he was seeing with all the writing systems he could think of. After some more squinting he finally guessed, “Is that Korean?”

“I see my handwriting isn’t that bad.” A slight smile tucked on her lips.

“So you have connections to Korea?” It felt like a whole new dimension was opening up to him. His mind struggled to keep up.

“He lives in Japan, but this makes communication easier,” she shook him off her shoulder with an exasperated sigh and repressed laugh, “And it keeps people like you from sticking their noses where they don’t belong.” She finished writing her sentence and then turned to him. “Which reminds me, I will be going to Tokyo for two days.”

Jin was so surprised that she was actually telling him that she was going away, where she was going, and for how long, that he didn’t even really process the information at first. He shook himself out of his amazement. “Wait, why? And when?”

Kaori put her clipboard away and leaned an arm on the sofa. “I have to meet some people and make arrangements. It will be from Friday till Sunday.”

So it was over the weekend. His gaze lingered a little longer on the papers she had written. "Can I come with you?" Her expression turned suspicious. "It's been a while since I've been to Tokyo, and we've never gone on a trip together. You don't even have to tell me who you're meeting or what you're doing. I can go sightseeing while you do your thing."

Kaori looked at him for a long time, weighing her options. Her face stayed impassive, not diverging any of her thoughts. "Okay," she said slowly, releasing the word into the air like a baby bird testing its wings. "But you will have to entertain yourself for the most part. I'm taking the Shinkansen at five in the afternoon."

Jin beamed. "Great. Do you already know where you- where we will stay?"

Her stare burned through him, searching for something. Jin nervously rearranged his legs under him. "You can stay at my place," she said finally.

He had not expected that. "You have your own place? Like, an apartment?"

"Yes. It's nothing fancy, but there's enough room for two, and it's easy to reach all parts of the city from there." She was still watching him, waiting for his reaction.

Jin felt like he was about to take another step further away from Kaori, from his past life. This person didn't exist in a vacuum. He knew that, and still, every evidence of it formed another crack in his reality. Impatiently waiting until it would all come crashing down. She wasn't confined to the hospital. She wasn't someone that just hung around his apartment, faking normalcy, poorly imitating the relationship he once had. There was a history. A history that was catching up to him faster and faster. Again, he was confronted with the image that he was just a tiny speck in this person's long life. A technicality that had to be dealt with. One step on a staircase that led high up to a nebulous goal.

"Sounds great." He forced himself to smile. She must've noticed his tension, but didn't acknowledge it.

"Good. Then it's a date." A soft smile, clashing with hard eyes.



They were standing on their designated platform, bracing themselves against the May weather. It was warm, but rainy. The air was so humid it was dripping. Jin constantly had to clean his foggy glasses. His t-shirt was sticking to his skin, ready to be flash-frozen by the air-conditioner of the Shinkansen. All the things he would need for the weekend were stuffed into a backpack. Kaori had her things secured in her postbag. Both of them were gripping their respective bag straps, and blinking against the rain.

“Nice weather,” he commented.

“I hope you will enjoy your sightseeing,” she joked with a crooked smile.

Jin groaned.

Once inside the train, things were much nicer. They got out their bento boxes. Kaori told him some ghost stories and interesting facts about the mountains and towns that were flashing past the window outside. While the stories about a suicide bridge and a horse that killed itself were a little disturbing, there was still a hint of the atmosphere of a normal couple going for a trip and enjoying themselves in the air.

Thankfully, the weather had cleared up in Tokyo. The station was packed with people, but Kaori managed to part the ocean of bodies in front of her like a ship's bow, slapping her IC card on the gates and marching single-mindedly through the hallways. It was almost 7 pm, meaning the worst of the evening rush hour had died down in the metro, even giving them the opportunity to sit down for five minutes. When they got out at Iidabashi station, the sun had almost completely set.

The apartment complex they were heading for looked completely nondescript. Just a ten story building that at some point probably had been white, but was now just a sooty grey. All that connected the different stories was an openair metal staircase, probably also functioning as a fire escape. The corridors that the different apartments branched off of, looked wet and oppressive. Fluorescent light, yellow with dirt, flickered on the ceiling, making the series of doors and barred windows along the facade look even darker.

Their destination was on the fifth floor. There was no movement or noise indicating the existence of neighbors, just a droning ventilation

shaft in the distance. Still, Jin tried to stay close to Kaori, throwing glances over his shoulder from time to time.

“Nice neighborhood.” He instinctively kept his voice low.

She pulled a key ring he had never seen before out of her pocket. “It serves its purpose.” Whatever that purpose might be. “I don’t live here to make friends.” The door clicked. With a grand gesture, she held it open for him. “Ladies first.” With a smile that didn’t reflect his uncertainty, he stepped into the darkness.

He heard the tap of a lightswitch behind him, and a short corridor became illuminated by a low energy light bulb. To his right, a doorless archway opened to what he guessed was a kitchen. There were two more doors to his left, and another one at the back. Jin took off his shoes and risked a look into the kitchen. After some blind padding around on the wall, he found the switch. It was just a small cooking area with a fridge and a table enclosed by two chairs. Two cooking tops and no oven. For supposedly not being lived in for five months, it was surprisingly clean.

He turned around again, and explored the other two doors on the left. One was a bedroom mostly used up by a futon that looked like it could host two adults if they pressed close together, and an old dresser with a cheap analog clock on top of it. The second was a bathroom, where the toilet and shower were so close together that you could basically fall from one to the other without needing to touch the ground. A lonely cup with a simple red toothbrush was occupying the sink. Two travel sized bottles of shower gel and shampoo lined the ground of the shower. Both nondescript white with black letters indicating their contents. Everything looked clean, but that made it seem all the more impersonal. Nothing he had encountered so far told him anything about the person that was living here. Despite her basically devouring books, he had not even seen so much as a piece of paper lying around here. He shut the door, and turned to the last unexplored thing in this apartment.

“Don’t go in there,” came a voice from the entrance, as he touched the handle. Kaori had taken off her shoes as well, and was leaning against the wall by the kitchen entree. Jin tried the handle anyway. It was locked. “Believe me, you don’t want to know.”

“That doesn’t exactly stifle my curiosity,” he tried to joke.

She came over to him, and pried his hand away from the door. “It’s

better for you if you just leave it be.” Her face softened a little. Thoughtfully, she turned his hand around in her own, brushing her thumb over his palm. “I might show you at some point, but not this time.” Still holding his hand, she pulled him back to the kitchen.

She fumbled around with a small black radio that was sitting on the table, until she found a music channel playing whatever J-Pop band was currently popular. “Sorry, this is the only form of entertainment I have here.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure we won’t get bored.” He opened the fridge. There wasn’t much inside. Just a carton of soya milk, a 2L bottle of Jasmine tea, and a packaged bun of melon bread. The cupboards looked better. Behind one door he found rice, instant ramen, tins of curry and soup, and some rice crackers. He pulled out the bag of crackers. They made themselves as comfortable as possible on the kitchen chairs and spent the next few hours just talking and listening to music.

Apparently Kaori preferred Tokyo over the less busy Sendai. The more people the better. Just get swallowed by the anonymity the world’s most populous metropolis bestowed. Jin could see the benefits that could bring for the one sitting across from him. There were so many people, nobody would care or make much of a fuss about someone disappearing or drastically changing their personality. If you weren’t staging a second Aum Shinrikyo, no one would pay you any mind, and hiccups in everyday life were quickly forgotten. It was obviously working for her, since it didn’t seem like anyone aside from a handful of people knew her, despite her prolonged life.

Before going to bed, Jin spread the few things he brought with him around the available rooms, boldly putting his toothbrush next to hers. Things already looked much more homely. It was like this apartment was a sketch, waiting to be coloured with personality. Back in the bedroom there was a short tussle over the blanket, until limbs and bodies had been arranged. As usual, Kaori spooned up behind him. The ground was a bit too hard for Jin’s taste, but he could deal with it for two nights.

The next day, they went together to the metro, but soon parted ways. Jin to Shinjuku’s city center, Kaori to Shibuya. True to his word, he didn’t ask what she was going to do there. While he would have

preferred to share this experience with someone, he still enjoyed his time. Strolling around parks, walking around the pedestrian area, visiting museums. It did get a little boring after a while, so in the afternoon he went over to Shibuya, despite it being pretty much impossible to find someone there, even if you were meeting up at a specific spot. Unsurprisingly, he saw no trace of her. The bustle of the crowd was still nice.

As expected, he was the first one to return to the apartment. He let himself in with the key ring Kaori had given him. Completely exhausted, he broke down on one of the chairs in the kitchen and stretched his legs. After he could kind of feel his feet again, he looked around. There wasn't much to do, when you were alone. Kaori must not come here for more than food and sleep. His gaze fell on the key ring. There were four more keys. He remembered the locked door. His watch indicated that it was only 6 pm. Knowing her, it would take at least two more hours until she came back. He picked up the keys and thoughtfully swung them around his finger.

Having made up his mind, he stood up again, legs still a little wobbly. In front of the destined door, he eyeballed the lock, and began trying the keys. His second attempt proved successful, there was an audible click. Jin took a step back, waiting. When nothing happened, he came closer, and swung open the door. Beyond it was complete blackness. This part of the corridor was already only sparsely lit, and the room seemed to be windowless, making the only thing he could see, two rows of white tiles on the ground. They looked similar to the ones in the bathroom.

Jin wished he had a flashlight. Carefully, he leaned his head through the doorway and edged his hand along the wall beside him, hoping for a lightswitch. Up to his elbow in impenetrable darkness, his fingertips finally bumped into a plastic unevenness. He fumbled it a little, until he found a switch to flick. Slowly, a bare light bulb that was hanging from the high ceiling awoke back to live, doing its best to banish the shadows.

He took a couple of steps inside. The floor was indeed made up of white tiles, a drain embedded in the middle, currently half-hidden by a table. There were two metal tables pushed against the wall to the right, taking up half of the rooms diminishing space. The left wall was completely covered by a high shelf. It was stuffed full with books, scrolls, loose papers, boxes of random items, and glass containers filled with some kind of hazy green-yellow liquid. The wall straight ahead of him was covered with crude paper sketches that were

drowning in sticky notes. All the personality that was missing from the rest of the apartment had been hidden away in here.

A rope was tightening itself around Jin's throat, forcing him to only take shallow breaths. Still, he walked further into the room. If he concentrated, he could make out a faint smell of disinfectant in the air. He decided to focus on the wall of sketches first. Most of them didn't make much sense. Something that looked like a big tree with squares - maybe doors? - around it. The sticky notes had mathematical equations written on them. Another one was a drawing of what could possibly represent flames with various arrows connecting them. There were notes written around it in a handwriting he knew quite well by now, but it was too small for him to read properly. He had trouble with it in its normal size, trying to make out anything under one centimeter was impossible.

One thing he could decipher was a roughly sketched map of Japan. Most of the land except for Hokkaido, Okinawa and the other smaller islands was fenced in by a square with ten red hotspots highlighted over several major cities, including two in Tokyo and one over Sendai. Jin licked his lips, feeling sweat running down his neck. His palms were clammy. There were some more arrows connecting the whole thing, indicating some form of movement with square kilometers listed on the side.

He let it be for now, and turned to the shelf instead. At random, he pulled out a book. *Surgical Abortion: History, Overview and Methods* Jin frowned. Certainly an odd choice of literature. He flipped through the pages. It was written in English. There were a few photos of surgical and general medical tools. Nothing too graphic. It seemed to be directed at an audience that was already rudimentarily familiar with the topic and had experience in the medical field. He put the book away again, and chose a scroll next. There was no indication from the outside on what it was about. When he opened it up, a flood of *kanji* washed over him. His first guess was Chinese, until he noticed the little characters written on the side. *Kanbun* then. With what little he could understand - or more like guess - he surmised that the document was detailing the hierarchy and movement of officials working in the imperial palace. The imperial palace in Heian-kyo to be precise. Judging by the material of the scroll, it could even be an original document. This should be in a museum, not some small dingy apartment.

Lastly, he reached for a stack of old papers. The first page was a handwritten bullet point list, the last line underlined twice with a big

X next to it. When he turned it over, he almost dropped the whole thing. It was a very detailed drawing of a fetus. Far too realistic for his liking. If he had to guess, he would say it was a human one, but whatever child would come from it, would probably not turn out very healthy. Lines spread out from various body parts with notes written next to it. He filed the page to the back, now more prepared for what he might find next. Another fetus. Different, but equally as grotesque as the first one, barely something you could call human. He pitied whoever had to carry this inside them. The next seven pages also depicted fetuses, becoming smaller and smaller, looking less and less like a living organism.

Feeling like he saw enough paper for the day, he sorted the sketches back to their original order, and stuffed them into the shelf, shifting his attention to a flask of liquid. Even though the inside was muddled, the container itself was clean. Not a speck of dust. Tentatively, he turned it in its place. Something was moving with the liquid. He shook it a little more and a pair of eyes jumped forward, knocking against the glass. Jin jerked his hand away, barely repressing a scream. In his panic he almost knocked the preparation to the ground, but caught it just in time. With the tip of his fingers, careful not to touch too much of it, he returned it to its place.

The eyeballs were slightly bobbing up and down. Their optic nerves were waving behind them like the fins of a tadpole. The iris might have been blue or grey, it was hard to tell with the dirty preservation fluid. But even diluted he could tell that the eyes were more opalescent than he had ever seen on any normal person. Like clear ocean water being poured into a muddy pond. The other thing that struck him was the size. They were far smaller than his own. Too small to belong to the average adult. It must've been someone very short. Or very young. But even a kindergartener would look big next to it. More like...

Jin stumbled back. He needed to get out of here. Now. In his haste, he more fell than walked out of the room, remembering just in time to turn off the light, and lock the door behind him. He pressed his hands over his mouth, and slid down the wall. His thoughts were running in circles. There were too many of them, making it impossible to grasp only one. Buzzing around in his head like a bee hive. For several minutes, he just sat there, letting his feelings wash over him freely.

When his legs started to cramp from the tension, he decided that he needed a shower. The hot water helped wash away the images of what he had seen, drowning out the too young eyes watching him. He

couldn't forget, but it made him feel cleaner, at least on the outside. He went to the kitchen, and turned up the radio, not allowing his mind to linger on past events, keeping it busy with pop music instead. Since he needed to occupy his hands somehow, he started cooking dinner.

About half an hour later, the front door opened. Jin immediately jumped out of his seat. Kaori let the door slam shut with a sigh, stretching her arms, and kicking off her shoes.

"Ah hi," she greeted, "I'll be with you in a minute." She stalked off in the direction of the bathroom. Jin walked out into the corridor, observing her every step. Nerves on edge.

She stopped in front of the bathroom, as if just noticing something. Slowly she turned around to the locked door. In his mind, Jin speed-ran through his memories, trying to remember if he forgot to put something in place. Her stare seemed to penetrate the wood of the door, scanning the room behind it. After what seemed like an eternity, she faced him. Even though she was a few meters away, and the light in the corridor dim, her eyes were shimmering in an orange-brown. Set alight from within. His fingers clawed into the doorway, sinews screaming.

"How was your day?" she asked, tone probing.

"Good," he pressed out.

"What did you do?"

Jin felt like a deer in headlights. "I went to the Historical Museum."

"That's nice." She gave him a chance to say more. When he didn't, she simply disappeared into the bathroom. He exhaled and went back into the kitchen.

Shortly after, she joined him. "Thanks for preparing dinner already," she said, grabbing a plate of curry rice. He just nodded.

She sat down across from him, and began digging into her food. The tension wouldn't leave his body. Spine ramrod straight, he sat on his chair. Her eyes roamed over him, while she thoughtfully chewed her food.

"You seem a bit high-strung. Is there something bothering you? Something you want to say? Or ask?" She knew. She definitely knew.

He wasn't ready to talk about his discovery yet.

His eyes sped around the room, searching for a topic of conversation. "How was Shibuya?"

"Busy. Many people. Especially at the station." Another beat went by. "You know, you wouldn't have those nightmares if you stopped repressing things. Just talk about it, and you will feel much better. Ignoring your problems won't solve them."

"I know," he stared at the table, following the wooden veins with his fingers. "I will deal with it. Eventually." Kaori raised an eyebrow, clearly not convinced. "It was just an exhausting day." He laid his head on the table.

"It sure was," she mused, lightly running her fingers through his hair.

Jin was lying awake, staring up at the dark ceiling, unable to sleep. As much as he tossed and turned, he couldn't find peace. The hard ground pressing into his ribcage didn't help. Hours went by with him not getting any closer to giving his eyes the rest they needed. Eventually he couldn't stand it anymore, he tugged on Kaori's top. She grumbled. He tugged more urgently. With a sigh she muttered, "What is it?"

"Would you ever hurt children?" he whispered.

He could make out one of her eyebrows creasing. "What? Children?" It sounded like her sleepy mind was struggling with the concept.

"Yes, children. Kids." He hesitated. "Infants. Would you hurt them?"

One eye opened, staring into the cement wall across from it. Eventually, she turned around to him, her previous drowsiness gone. "I tend to stay away from kids," she said in a low voice, "Can't relate to them and their small underdeveloped brains." She met his pressing gaze. "So, no. Not unless they obstruct my goals."

Jin mulled that answer over. "What do you mean by that?"

"If they hurt me, I will hurt them. It's the law of nature."

"Why would a child want to hurt you? How could they even hurt you?" he asked, confused.



Kaori gave a half-shrug. "Other people make them do it, opposing ideologies, there are several reasons. There are also some very special children." Her lips turned up into a wry smile.

"Like the ones with blue eyes?"

Her expression darkened for a second, before relaxing again. "Yes. Those." She reached out, and tried to brush the frown out of his brow. "If it makes you feel any better, my current plan is to not hurt a kid. Just keep it from getting in my way. Put it in timeout if you will." She snickered at her own joke.

Another plan. Was he involved in this one too? Would it include their future child? Did he need to care? "That does actually make me feel better." He crawled closer and rested his forehead against hers, feeling her stitches scratch against his skin. "Thank you for telling me."

"Sure," she hummed, and gave him a quick kiss. "Would you let me sleep now?"

"Yes, sorry," he smiled.

It could just be some medical preparation. A scientific curiosity. There were entire museums filled with them, that didn't mean that the owner of that museum personally killed all those people. The container had looked quite old, even if it was in good condition. Who knows how and under what circumstances it came into her possession. As long as Kaori wouldn't try to hurt their own child, it didn't need to concern him. She needed him, and she needed their child. She wouldn't do anything to put them in danger.

He forced himself to calm down, stop thinking in circles, and finally sleep. Still, there was the persistent sensation of too young blue eyes watching him through hazy liquid.

Jin stretched his aching shoulders. He couldn't wait to get back to his own bed. They would have to take the Shinkansen at 5 pm, giving them only a few hours in Tokyo today. Kaori seemed to be on a strict schedule. She left before 10. Jin saw little other choice than to go out too. He told her he would like to see Ginza, giving them some shared time on the metro again. When they reached his destination, he

pretended to leave the train, but got on the next wagon instead. Drawing on the meager spying skills he got from watching James Bond, he tailed her for the rest of the trip, staying far enough away to not be seen, but always at an angle where he could find her easily again.

Her final station was Shinagawa. The halls were less packed on a weekend, forcing Jin to stay farther behind to not get noticed. He made it through the metro gates and outside the building before he lost track of her. Carefully, he circled the station and nearby streets, but couldn't find her. Unsure what even to look for, he explored the area. Most of the buildings here belonged to corporations or bigger non-profit organizations. When slowly making his way deeper into the glass mountains, he came across a building surrounded by a wide spread-out park. It was very well kept with green trees and bushes being aligned in neat rows. The building looked like a mix of your typical business front and one of those modern Christian churches Americans were currently very fond of. The path leading to it was lined with high stone pillars stretching into the sky. An impressive and exhausting looking staircase guided it's visitors to the elevated entrance.

Admitting that it was impossible to find who he was looking for, he retraced his steps to the train station. This didn't seem like the kind of environment he could see her spending much time in, but then again he didn't know her that well.

Kaori came back just in time to get their things ready, looking a little worn out.

"Everything alright? You look tired." he asked.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Yes, I just had to deal with some very exhausting people." That was all he could get out of her for now. Jin was forced to shelve his further probing for another time.

Before leaving, he took a last glance around the small apartment. It looked as non-descript again as back when he first arrived. Any hint of the character of the owner tucked away behind a locked door.

Jin was sitting on the couch, watching a depressing documentary about bengal tigers, when he heard a triumphant shout from the bathroom. He glanced in the vague direction the noise had come from, but was too engrossed in the report of how poaching threatened to wipe out one of the most beautiful animals on earth to really care. Hurried footsteps could be heard, and then Kaori appeared in the doorway, grinning gleefully. At that, he did look up.

“What’s gotten into you?” he asked, still half listening to the documentary.

She was twirling some white plastic stick between her fingers. “Guess what I just did on the toilet?”

Jin pulled a face. “Do I want to know?”

“Believe me, you do,” She wiggled the object a little more insistently in his direction.

He squinted at it, trying to make out what it was. “I can’t see anything, if you’re moving it around this much.” Reluctantly, he stood up and came closer. After the first few steps, the realization hit him. “Is that...?” Her expression couldn’t be more smug. “What does it say?” With her reaction, he could make a very educated guess, but he wouldn’t believe it until he saw the evidence for himself. He reached out for the pregnancy test, “Can I see it?”

The piece of plastic was handed to him like a trophy. Jin took his time inspecting the faint purple plus sign, turning it under the light to make sure his eyes weren’t playing tricks on him. “You are sure it’s not a false positive?” His voice was hoarse, barely able to carry the question.

“This is already the second one. Both are positive.” She had crossed her arms, and was leaning against the doorframe, watching emotions unfold across his face.

He had waited for this moment for so long. They had waited for this moment for so long. A child with Kaori, a real family. The dream had finally become a reality, he couldn’t believe it. He would be a father. His feet became wobbly, the ground seemed to tilt. Driven with desperation, he fell forward into her arms, knocking the air out of her lungs, and making her stumble a few steps before catching herself on the doorframe. The plight of the bengal tigers was forgotten in the background as he squeezed her tightly. “Thank you,” he breathed into the crook of her neck.

“You’re welcome. The uterus is one of my specialties you could say. You can achieve a lot with it if you know how to use it.”

The initial agreement between them came back to darken his excitement. Jin worried his lip, “What happens now?”

“Now we wait nine months.”

“So it’s just like any other pregnancy?”

Kaori thoughtfully looked to the side. “There are ways to speed things up, but I don’t want to rush and then mess something up along the way. I would prefer if this works on the first try. So the traditional method will have to suffice.”

It sounded so clinical. Like she was simply crossing pea plants with one another, not having a child with him. This might change when the kid was actually born, after all they say a mother and her child share a unique bond. Surely an experience like this must have some kind of emotional impact on her too. He looked into her dark eyes. She seemed happy, but not entirely for the same reasons that he was. Why she did the things she did, didn’t matter. It was the result that counted. She was pregnant, he would have a family, that was the important part here. Jin was sure to make the most out of what had been given to him. Counting from the accident until the birth, it was more than a year he would have been granted with Kaori. A shadow of her, but still her.

The next morning, Jin stared at his reflection in the bathroom mirror, lazily brushing his teeth. Should he feel different? He was a father now. He had a new responsibility. This should feel...grander. But he didn’t feel any difference. It was probably more apparent if you are the mother. What was he supposed to do now? Buy kids toys? Was it too early for that? He never thought he would get this far. Maybe it would be good to borrow some books. Surely he wasn’t the only one having these questions. Despite his unique circumstances, the experience of becoming a father was pretty universal.

The door opened behind him, and through the mirror he could see Kaori enter. Jin gurgled a “good morning” past his toothbrush. She just nodded in reply, absentmindedly picking sleep out of her eyes, and grabbed her comb. Something was different about her. His mental image didn’t quite line up with reality. He turned around to get a good look at her, his eyes following the combing movements through

her barely tousled hair. From the zenith all the way to the ends. His attention wandered from the parting of her hair to the center of her forehead. The stitches. The black threads were gone, replaced by scar tissue that only barely stood out against her paler skin.

The toothbrush hung forgotten in his mouth. Without noticing it, he leaned closer, taking in every twitch of her facial muscles, every blink of her eyes, every fidget of her fingers. This could be another one of his nightmares, where Kaori would break down into a lifeless husk as soon as he looked away. His subconsciousness had tortured him to often to let him get his hopes up. Still. She turned to him, "Something on my face?"

Jin remembered the toothpaste in his mouth and spat it out before saying cautiously, "No." There wasn't. Intensely, he searched her eyes for a glimmer of familiar warmth, an expression he thought had been extinct already. Something. Anything. Pressure was building up in his chest, reminding Jin that he had been holding his breath. He exhaled slowly through his nose, trying to stay calm. "Your stitches are gone." He finally admitted.

"Ah. Yes." She put the comb away and picked up her own toothbrush. A new one, after the old one had been thrown away in the hospital. "I don't need them anymore." The agreement had been to have a child together. There was a possibility that the other had returned Kaori to him, now that the conception had been achieved. His gaze burned into her, waiting for a sign, a hint of whatever kind. She returned the stare with the same heat. "It's still me if that's what you were wondering."

Tension left his body. His shoulders slumped, falling in on themselves like a card house on a windy day. "What do you mean, you don't need them anymore?"

"Well, you got me pregnant, so I will be staying in this body for a while. Might as well get comfortable."

So it was the other way around. The stitches had signified her not having quite settled in, unsure if she had found an adequate host. Images of a grinning brain flashed in his mind. A foreign force moving Kaori's freshly resurrected body to cover the horrific organ from sight. Shivers raced down his spine. If he had pushed further in their first meeting, if he had dug his fingers past her barriers, he could've found out if it was true or if his mind was just dramatizing the situation. He could've seen the real form of the one he was about to bring new life into the world with. He felt young pale eyes bore into his back again.

But he already knew who he was dealing with and he had made his peace with the situation. There was no reason to get upset or complain now. Everything he ever wanted was just within reach.

Kaori hugged him from behind and put her chin on his shoulder, watching their joined bodies in the mirror. Her too wide smile was further evidence for who he was speaking to. “Doesn’t it look much nicer like this? I doubt you liked those threads. They can become quite tedious over time. So itchy too.”

It did look nicer. More natural. Less foreign. It was disorienting. The lines became more blurred. The Kaori he had known and loved for 14 years, and the Kaori he had spent the last five months with, the one that would carry out his child, slowly becoming one.

### Chapter End Notes

Jin: Would you hurt a child?

Kenjaku, sweating: What's a child?

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the nice comments! They were very encouraging to read.

I always planned to make chapter 5 & 6, but this one got really long, so I'm adding another chapter. This one still ended up at 18k...I hope you don't mind.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wasuke watched the balls shoot through the insides of the machine with tired eyes. Neon lights were washing across his face, his hand was clutching numbly the round black knob. Jingles and the pinging of the Pachinko machines were filling the air, so loud it was drowning out the occasional triumphant screams in the background. By now he was deaf and blind to it all. He didn't even know what he was doing here. A habit, he supposed. His son would likely call it something else.

His son. It had been months since they last talked. Less time since he had seen him. They might not be on speaking terms - by Wasuke's own choice - but he had to check in on his only child, especially with the company he currently liked to keep. Jin was still spending his time with that woman. Wasuke refused to call her by the name she had once been known to him. That wasn't Kaori. By now, everyone knew it. Even Jin seemed to be aware of it. Despite that, he chose to stay by her side.

He had never gotten a proper chance to grieve. His fiancée had been ripped from his side, and then returned to him in a mangled, distorted form. The boy must still be holding on to fleeting hopes. Couldn't he see what he was dealing with?

Kaori had been a strong woman, both in body and mind, but she hadn't been cruel. She cared deeply for her friends and family, and would do everything in her power to protect them. Such a bright smile, wide welcoming eyes. Apathy was a foreign concept to her. No matter what happened, she always knew how to cheer up the people around her. They had been a perfect fit, evidenced by their long lasting relationship. Nothing of that was left now. Her body was alive, but her mind was gone. Just the host of a parasite.

As a father, Wasuke simply couldn't stay away. He didn't want to wake up and have the police knocking on his door, informing him that his son had been found dead in his apartment. That woman, or whatever it was, couldn't be trusted. Recently, Jin had looked quite unsettled and lost in thought. Despite that, no sign of leaving or reaching out to him. He hoped he had at least given up on the thought of making a family with her. It was ludicrous. Wasuke hadn't interacted much with her, but she was clearly not harboring good intentions. Jin was free to do what he wanted, but things changed if he decided to rope a child into the whole thing. This wasn't just about him.

The balls clattered to the bottom of the playfield without a win. The old man sighed and fed more of them into the machine, not even thinking about the movement, his hands automatically going through the motions.

"Father! There you are." A familiar bright smile came into view, high cheerful voice, short black hair waving around the face in excitement. Kaori had an arm around his shoulders. She clapped him slightly on the back, and walked by to lean next to the outdated machine. The smile crinkled her eyes. "I knew I would find you here. Don't worry, I won't tell Jin." She held a finger against her lips in a conspiratorial manner.

The stitches were gone. Kaori's forehead was unmarred except for a faint pink scar. Wasuke stared at her wide-eyed. He must have fallen asleep in the parlor again. This couldn't be real. Was she back? Just like that? Had Jin managed to chase the imposter away? She looked so carefree, as if death had never touched her. The coldness in her eyes gone. "What...you...", he stammered, unable to form a coherent thought.

"I have some good news for you. Jin would've told you himself, but he doesn't want to argue again," she sighed benignly, hands in her pockets. He still couldn't find words. Kaori leaned forward, "Good thing you're sitting already because this is big." A grin split her face, eyes turning sly, "You will become a grandfather." She slammed her hand against the machine. A metal ball found its target, and a mechanical voice accompanied by loud blaring music proclaimed Wasuke a winner.

Of course it wasn't Kaori. Wasuke was berating himself for even entertaining the idea, for falling for the illusion. He should be better than this. His son's life depended on him being better than this, than



her. It would have been so easy, so tempting, to believe that it had all just been a bad dream. Kaori back to like she had always been, continuing where they had left off, forgetting that something else had ever entered her body. But life wasn't easy, he knew that better than anyone. He was getting too old. This parasite acted like a decent human being for one minute, dragging up memories as its costume and props, and he had been ready to embrace her with open arms. How foolish of him.

"What's the meaning of this?" he bit out.

There was that smile again. How he hated it. "I," she pointed to her chest, "am pregnant. And you," she turned the finger to him, "will be a grandfather because this child," a motion to her flat stomach, "is your son's."

Time seemed to slow to a halt. A shadow fell over his mind. His blood was like ice in his veins. What had he done. What had Jin done? He wanted a child, a family. He wanted the love of his life back, but why go to these lengths? Despite veering on the naive side, Jin wasn't stupid. He was aware and in control of his actions. Multiple times he had assured his father that he knew who he was dealing with, and that he didn't care. What did he see in her? What did he gain from her? His wish for a family could possibly cost him his life and ruin the one of an innocent child. How was this a fair bargain to him?

"How is that possible?" he croaked.

She gave him a look of mock concern. "I thought you knew. Or how did you manage to bring Jin into this world."

The old man grinded his teeth. She was able to revive Kaori's body. She must've done something to it to be able to carry a child. He decidedly did not further follow the thought of how exactly the conception happened. His son was such a suicidal fool.

"You bastard," he growled, "What did you say to him. What kind of nonsense did you put in my son's head to make him agree to this."

She held up her hands, "He knew what he was getting into, it was his own choice. I'm not forcing this on him. I could've done this with anyone else if he turned me down. Jin wanted a child and I am simply granting that wish."

"And what do you plan to do with that child?"

An innocent smile. “Not much for now, and by the time it becomes important, you likely won’t need to concern yourself with it.”

Wasuke narrowed his eyes. “Is that a threat?”

“You are being too dramatic,” she sighed, “I’m simply talking realistically.” She pushed herself off the blaring Pachinko machine. “In any case, you might want to give Jin a call and congratulate him on his new role as a father. It’s the proper thing to do.” Giving him a knowing look, she pressed the red button at the top of the machine to call for staff. “I think you should exchange your winnings. You’ve spend enough time here. Get a grip on your life. How else do you plan to raise your grandchild?”

Now that did sound like a threat, but not one directed at him. The implications were clear. Before he could reply, she gave him a last glimpse at that detestable smile, and simply brushed past him, disappearing in the noisy chaos of the gambling hall.

Jin was sitting at the kitchen table with Kaori, listlessly forming little whirls of soba noodles on his plate with his chopsticks. It had been just over a week since the big news, but the pressure of parenthood was already bearing down on him. This pressure was purely self-imposed, since it was too early to really do anything, but that gave him a lot of time to fluctuate between excitement and worry so fast it gave him whiplash. The other day he had seen a billboard with a father playing ball with his child and wondered if that would be him in a few years. Another commercial about baby food, filling Jin’s head with a whole array of new questions. What was the right one? What if he didn’t buy the right one? What if he didn’t feed his child enough? A news report about a father killing his daughter. What if he ended up hurting his child? He didn’t think he could possibly kill them, but what if the baby fell from the changing table? What if he left them in the car too long? What if they got a fever?

He had already combed the library for books about parenting and returned home with about half of them, earning him a raised eyebrow from Kaori. When being offered a couple, she simply waved him away, and said she didn’t need them, but he was welcome to dive into the topics of changing diapers and breastfeeding as much as he wanted. She would leave these things to him.

Jin told himself to at least wait a few more months before going crazy. Everything would work out fine in the end. Worse people than him had successfully raised children, there was no cause to think he would be any different. And he wasn't alone in this. As much as Kaori didn't want to get into the gritty details of parenthood, she would at least be there and lend a hand when needed. She needed their child. For something. If not motherly love, then her utilitarian attitude would ensure the child's safety. Worst case, he always had his father to go to.

Jin frowned down at his noodles, then looked up and watched Kaori dip a small bundle of her own food into the soy sauce before slurping them up. "How did the talk with my father go?" he asked.

The ends wiggled up to her mouth like little tentacles, getting shorter and spasming faster until disappearing into her mouth. She dabbed some soy sauce off of her chin before giving him a crooked smile and saying, "As well as you'd expect. He is still convinced I will bite your head off like a praying mantis. Soon he will be fussing all over you."

He huffed, "Of course. I can't wait for even more of his opinions about our relationship. You don't need to tell me, I can already imagine his tirade about the pregnancy." He imitated his father's gruff voice. "How could I do this? Don't I know who I'm dealing with? I am throwing my life away." After a pause he went on, "You do bite though." The corners of his mouth twitched with a repressed laugh. Jin lightly brushed his fingers over a red swelling at the crook of his shoulder, shuddering a little at the aching feeling.

Kaori grinned. He could feel a foot press against the inner side of his calf, wander up to his knee, and stimulate another mark left right where his thigh muscles began. "It's how I show my affection. You can't tell me you don't like it. I never hear you complain." She leaned her head to the side. "Quite the opposite actually." Slow circles were drawn on his inner thigh, making Jin clench the chopsticks harder between his fingers. Then, she suddenly removed her foot, leaving a painful emptiness behind, and turned more serious. "Wasuke will be a good grandfather. If you need someone to rely on or help with the child, he will be there."

He was surprised by her sincerity, but nodded. "I know. I just hope he won't be needed. Not as long as he acts the way he does." He gave her an encouraging smile. "I'm sure we can manage on our own."

She hummed and turned back to her food. Jin did the same, swallowing two, three bites before finally building up the courage to

breach the topic that had been on his mind for a while. He put his chopsticks down.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about,” he started slowly. Kaori looked up, raising an eyebrow. Nervously, he licked his lips. “You see, Kaori and I talked a lot about what we would do if we did have a child. I’m sure you already know that,” he gestured up to her scar, feeling like he was making a fool of himself. Her expression didn’t change, giving him nothing to work with. “Anyway. We said we wanted to marry before the child would be born.” She still stared at him impassively. Jin felt like wading through quicksand. Every sentence was torturous to get through, threatening to drag him under with just one careless word. “So I wanted to ask,” A deep breath. “If you would like to marry? Me?” He added the last word after some hesitation, just in case the subject hadn’t been clear.

Kaori leaned her head into one hand and studied him. His heart was hammering in his chest, probably transporting all his blood directly to his ears. “You and Kaori wanted to marry, but what does that have to do with me? I’m not her. What would be the point of doing it now?”

Jin tried not to feel too disheartened by those words. He hadn’t expected her to jump at the opportunity. “See it as a last favour to her? Or me? It doesn’t have to be anything big. It could just be us two. And the clerk at the registry office.” The pitch of his voice was slowly climbing higher, forcing him to clear his throat.

She was still not giving him any real reaction. “If it’s just paperwork, why do it at all? From what I know, you had other things planned. It might be a nice gesture, but in the end there’s no difference except for one line on your family registration sheet.”

It looked like he had to change his approach. Appealing to emotions wouldn’t do him any good. “It would be better for the child too,” he said, more resolute now. “Children born outside of marriage face difficulties, socially and economically. With the marriage tax benefits it would be easier for us to support them financially. There are also so many regulations and laws we would have to work through, starting with seemingly easy decisions such as, which family name they should have. Every decision for their future would require a walk to the city hall. Why go through all this effort if we could just go there once, submit our documents and be done with it.”

Hopefully it wasn’t too obvious that he was just repeating phrases he had picked up from various advice booklets. He felt uncomfortable at

having to resort to such impersonal language, but if it got her to say yes in the end, he could live with it.

This speech seemed to have gotten through to her. She was looking off to the side, and tapping her index finger against her nose in thought. Jin nervously shifted in place, waiting for her judgement with baited breath. "Those are some good points," she relented.

He leaned forward. "It's just one line on a piece of paper." There was a little smugness leaking into his voice.

The corners of her mouth twitched. "Very well," she sighed.

"So that is a yes?" he pressed.

Kaori rolled her eyes up to the ceiling, as if begging the heavens for spiritual guidance. "Yes."

Before he even fully knew what he was doing, he flew around the table and pulled her in a tight hug, nearly shoving her from the chair. She groaned. "Thank you," he exclaimed, quickly pressing two kisses on her mouth and her forehead. "You are the best."

He slid into her lap, and gave her a bright grin, arms slung around her neck and the back of the chair. Despite her miffed attitude, she was clearly repressing a laugh. "Sure."

"I can get the papers tomorrow. We can submit them together with the other necessary documents next week. What do you think?" he beamed at her.

"Sounds great. I'm glad bureaucracy is getting you hot and bothered." She reached around him and lifted her almost empty plate to her, so she could continue eating. Jin turned around in place and got his own food. A deadpan look bored into him. "You're just going to stay here. In my lap. Eating." He smiled at her. Kaori muttered something under her breath before saying, "Get up for a second or my legs will fall asleep." Jin obliged, and after shifting the chair as well as herself a bit, she patted her thigh again.

Sitting comfortable, he dug into the soba noodles with a renewed appetite. It was incredible. He would have a child, be a father, and marry the woman he had loved since high school. Everything he had ever wished for. Admittedly, it hadn't happened in the way he thought it would or how Kaori and him had planned it, but that just showed that life was full of surprises. There was still a nagging voice in the

back of his head, but he decidedly ignored it for now.

In the evening, Jin was standing in the dark living room, listening to a voicemail his father had left.

*Hello Jin.*

Silence.

*I'm sorry for not reaching out sooner. I heard the big news and want to congratulate you. All those years of trying and now it finally happened. You must be over the moon. I'm sure you will be a great father. It's really unfortunate that we have to do it like this. This isn't how these things are supposed to be. I should go out with you for a drink or we celebrate at home. Together. But you might not want that for now. If you do, just tell me and I'll be there.*

Deep breaths.

*I hate to bring this topic up again because we just can't seem to see eye-to-eye on this one, but this is important. As you might already know, she talked to me.*

No need for clarification who 'she' was.

*The way she worded things makes me worry for you. She talked about me raising your child. Call me paranoid, but the only way I see this happening is if you weren't there.*

Some shuffling on the other end. Hurried breaths.

*You might not want to hear this, but there is a very real possibility that she plans to kill you. You could die, you understand? If you stay with her, you will die. She might have granted your wish, but she surely expects you to pay for it somehow. This is not Kaori and Kaori will never come back. She might not do anything during the pregnancy, but when the child is born, you have to leave. For your sake, and the child's. Leave her. Take your child and go. Don't let them be alone with her for even a moment. Just get away.*

Silence.

*This might seem dramatic to you now, but I just want to warn you. Some day you will be of no use to her anymore, and she will get rid of you.*

Silence.

*This phone call turned bleaker than I wanted. Listen, even if I turn out to be wrong in the end, just be cautious. I only want the best for you and your child. My grandchild.*

A sigh.

*I hope I can talk to you in person soon. Take care. Bye.*

Jin frowned down at the answering machine. He turned around to the door. Kaori was standing in the frame, silhouette illuminated by the light coming from the hallway. She walked over to him at a leisurely pace. When standing shoulder to shoulder, she smiled up at him. He tried in vain to mirror her expression.

“Do you really intend for him to raise our child?” he murmured.

“I intend to stay here for as long as I’m needed. You and Wasuke are much better with children than I am, so I will leave most of that to you. If you are busy, he has to take care of it. That’s all there is to this ‘threat’ he is talking about.”

He slowly breathed out, releasing the tension in his muscles. “I see. Good thing I brought so many books then. I don’t want to end up becoming useless.” The last part came out harsher than he had intended.

Kaori traced a hand up his arm, all the way to his face, and brushed her thumb across his cheek. “While I appreciate you enjoying fatherhood so much, that’s not your only role.” She leaned in for a kiss. It was a simple peck, but more tender than usual. His heart fluttered. “Don’t listen to your father. He has been skeptical since the beginning and still, nothing has happened. I have barely interacted with him. Who do you think knows me better, you or him?”

He looked into her eyes, dark brown in the shallow light. There was still a calculating edge to them. Ever since she had dropped the charade of being his childhood friend turned fiancée, it had become a constant companion. It only disappeared when she was asleep or for brief instances during sex. While still there, the edge was now

softened by something he'd like to think of as sincerity. By her standards, her gaze was downright kind. If she wanted to, she could've killed him after she got pregnant and dropped their baby on his father or taken off with them to do whatever it is she had planned for them. She was right. His father knew nothing about her or their relationship.

Jin slung his arms around her waist, and gave his response in the form of a kiss on her brow. "Let's go to bed."

His eyes slid back to the answering machine. He pressed a few buttons.

*Message has been deleted. No new messages.*

Half-lidded eyes watched him approvingly, a small smile playing around the lips. He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the bedroom.

For the next few days, Jin made sure to slide pamphlets from the city hall into Kaori's hands and casually recall anecdotes about the struggles unmarried couples with children faced in Japan. Just to ensure that she was well aware of the advantages a marriage with him would bring. It also functioned as a reminder to himself. Of course he wanted to marry Kaori, they had talked about it many times and it had been a fixed part of their future plans. But, as everyone liked to remind him, Kaori was dead. Now, the marriage was like a ritual he needed to complete. A last act they would perform together. Part of her would always live on in their child. Having the child and not marrying her would feel like disregarding her wishes.

That all begged the question who exactly he was marrying. The papers said Ito Kaori, but the one who had agreed to the marriage hadn't been her. The one he had tried to convince wasn't her. In a way, this could be seen as him marrying someone else not even half a year after Kaori's death. It wasn't like he would be opposed to spending more time - although maybe not the rest of his life - with the other Kaori. Usually he didn't even stress about who he was talking to. Most days he just felt like he was in a casual, albeit sometimes strange and frightening, relationship. Just in situations like this, the issue came up again. So many questions, so many confusing identities and relations. Viewing it as a simple bureaucratic process helped in that regard.



As always, the city hall was packed. Thankfully, the queue in front of their designated counter wasn't as long. Still, the whole process would take them a few hours. They passed the time by sharing Jin's mp3-player. He watched the serial numbers slowly go up, while Kaori seemed to organize contacts on her new flip phone. This one was bright red as opposed to the scratchy silver one he had seen her with before. It looked more modern too. He had no idea what she had done with Kaori's original one. Maybe it had been scrapped by the hospital staff after the accident. Even if he asked, she probably wouldn't give him a straight answer.

When their number came up, they pushed their way over to the counter. The woman behind the desk simply flipped through their forms, checking their entrees with a red pen. They had unanimously decided that Kaori would take on the name "Itadori". Her only living relative was her mother, and they had been estranged for years, making the choice quite easy for her. Jin and his father had always been more of a family to her than her own blood. The other Kaori didn't seem to care much either way, and just went with what he suggested.

Their staffer looked over the sufficiency of their documents, and then gathered everything into a plastic folder with a case number on it that got passed into the backend of the hall, where stressed employees shuffled through papers at record speed. The whole exchange had taken less than five minutes. They were told to come back in about two hours to pick up a copy of their updated family records, and then send off to make room for the next citizen. It wasn't exactly how Jin had imagined his wedding day in his youth - or even last year - but then, things never happen how you expect them to. He hadn't become a father in the conventional way either after all.

Since it was already 2 pm, they agreed to go out and eat ramen until their marriage application had been handled. Despite nothing being official yet, Jin saw it as a celebratory dinner. He could even convince Kaori to choose a proper diner and not just the dingy shop around the corner. The well-lit restaurant, consisting of a wide open space adorned with light wooden tables in the corners, was much more his taste. It actually gave him the feeling that this day and this meal was something special.

He decided on regular *tonkotsu* , while Kaori went for *tantanmen* . She slurped up one noodle, chewed thoughtfully, and then made a kind of miffed expression. With horror he watched as she proceeded to pour ropes upon ropes of chilli oil into the soup. Cupping his own bowl

protectively, he slid further away from her, just in case she spilled anything. After mixing everything, Kaori gave the dish another try and judged it with a satisfied nod.

“Japan has mellowed it down far too much,” she sighed. Jin had only tried the dish once, but vividly remembered it being quite spicy already. She gave him a crooked smile. “Do you want to try? Eat something with real flavor?”

The soup had started to take on an angry reddish hue. “No, I think I’m good,” he retorted, digging into his own ramen for emphasis.

Kaori pushed her bowl closer to him, attempting to lure him into the fiery pit of noodles. “Isn’t it tradition for couples to exchange gifts on their wedding day? I’m giving you a share of my meal.” She leaned further into his personal space.

Jin backed off with a nervous smile. “I really appreciate the sentiment, and I would have no problem sharing ramen with you, as long as it doesn’t contain a whole heap of chilli.”

She picked up one ramen noodle with her chopsticks and wiggled it in his direction. “Don’t disrespect Shichuan culture.” Bowl and chopsticks edged ever closer to him. “You can give me some of yours as well.”

Panicked, he looked for a way out of the situation. He stuttered, “You, uhm, you have eaten the original?” She stopped. “When it was first invented in China, I mean? In Shichuan?”

The chopsticks were lowered a little. “Yes. I happened to be in Chengdu, when it first became popular, around the early 1800s.” Jin flinched involuntarily at the casual mention of that number. A reminder of who he was dealing with. “Back then it didn’t have any soup. When they added it later on, the spiciness was also mellowed down.”

His strategy was working. If he could just keep her talking, she might forget about torturing him with this dish that was already making his eyes burn. “What were you doing in Chengdu? Do you visit China often?”

Finally, she put the threatening bowl down and shrugged, “It has always been a fountain for medical knowledge. Embryology as we know it today was making big waves around that time and China, in particular institutes at Chengdu, were just more open towards those

new ideas than Japan. Kind of a running theme of the city. Especially now, with the laws that have been passed in China a few years ago, Chengdu is basically flooded with people who feel like they couldn't express themselves elsewhere. It was also one of my destinations, when I left Japan for the first time."

Jin risked eating a little more of his *tonkotsu* . "When was that?"

"Let's see," Kaori tabbed her chopsticks against her lips and looked off into the distance. "It was towards the end of the Tang dynasty, but before things started to really turn south. Fortunately for me, I stayed there right when Little Taizong was trying to recapture the earlier golden age. With measured success. So that would narrow it down to somewhere in the middle of the 9th century. I can't remember the exact years."

A ramen noodle slithered its way into his windpipe. He choked. "Ninth?" he spluttered.

Middle of the ninth century meant early Heian period, around 850. Depending at what age she had started to travel, that would mean she was born in the early 800s, making her roughly 1200 years old. Jin stared into his noodle broth, grappling with that number. That couldn't be possible. How could anyone live that long? It couldn't be true. You read about those times in history books, and didn't run across its former citizens on the street. Nobody could be that old and act like...like that.

His brain struggled to comprehend a human life that long. Back then they didn't even have electricity. Okinawa wasn't part of Japan. The capital moved with the emperor or ruling empress. You still had noble families vying for power, and there wasn't much economic space between the nobility and the poor rice farmers. What had daily life back then even looked like if you weren't part of the court?

"Pretty weird being with someone so old, huh," Kaori's voice came from far away. "If you go now, you might be able to get your documents back before they change the status in the family registry."

That shook him out of his daze. "Forget it. I don't care if you were born a thousand years ago or are from the stone age, we're pulling through with this marriage." He challenged her incredulous look head-on. It was the right thing to do. He owed it to Kaori. His Kaori. And what's more, it was the safest thing to do for his baby. A safety net in case either of them couldn't provide for them for some reason.

"I'll even eat your ramen from hell," he boldly proclaimed.

Her face lit up and she immediately slid her bowl back in his direction. Jin swallowed hard, but pulled himself together. It was just ramen. He could handle a little spiciness.

He took a deep breath, "But I would prefer some of the minced pork." His hope was that, since it was on top, it had gotten the least exposure to the broth. Kaori picked up a generous chunk of meat. Using her left hand to catch any accidental spillage, she moved her chopsticks closer to his lips.

His gaze flickered between the chopsticks and her encouraging eyes, before he nervously opened his mouth. In the blink of an eye he closed his lips around the chopsticks and pulled back. Under different circumstances he might have savoured such an intimate moment more, but he was too worried any lingering might spread the spices further.

First, everything seemed fine. He chewed, and while the meat was certainly piquant, it didn't burn. Even when swallowing, it wasn't so bad. The pork wasn't too rough and not too soft, very well prepared. A pleasant nutty flavour.

Just when he was about to tell Kaori his review, a fire was lit in his throat. At first, it was just a flicker. Then, it rapidly grew into a full-on burn. It didn't stay in his throat either. The flames spread over the back of his tongue, to the roof of his mouth, trying to reach all the way up to his eyes. Desperately, he downed his whole glass of water, but it did nothing to stop the heat.

Jin clasped the edge of the of the table. Various fluids in his eyes and nose were trying to escape his body. He sniffed and threw an imploring glance at Kaori. She patted his back in broad strokes and gave him her best imitation of a sympathetic look.

"My father was right," he croaked, "You are trying to kill me." A sole tear ran down the bridge of his nose, only being held up by his glasses.

"If only you had listened to him," she replied in a sombre tone.

In an unexpected show of mercy, she slid her glass of mango juice over to him. He downed it all in one go. Paying for another drink was preferable over having to go through this any longer. The smooth texture of the juice did actually help alleviate the burning pain.

After his throat had more or less calmed down, he wiped the tears from his eyes, sniffled and glared at her, "I don't think you even deserve my *tonkotsu* . I should make you eat vinegar as payback."

She had a light smile on her face, looking like innocence itself. "History has taught us that repaying violence with violence only leads to misery. I promise I will make it up to you later." A mischievous wink accentuated her last words.

When they came back to the city hall, they only had to wait ten more minutes until they were finally given their certificate of marriage. His eyes glued to the paper, Jin walked out of the building with Kaori in tow. It looked so unassuming. Just a formal document like any other, only that it had the words 'married' and 'Itadori Kaori' on it. He was so engrossed by it, he almost ran into a cyclist. Kaori pulled him back just in time to avoid a collision.

They were only a few meters from the entrance to the city hall, the busy street just a few meters away. "Thanks," he breathed. Suddenly, he remembered something important. After some rummaging around in the pockets of his summer jacket, he produced a thin leather case, and held it towards Kaori. "I wanted you to have this."

Her expression was guarded, her eyes skeptic. Hesitantly, she took the case from him and slowly opened it, leaning slightly away as if expecting a letter bomb. The dark enclosure revealed a silver necklace threaded through a ring of the same colour. "It's my mother's," Jin explained sheepishly. "My father will kill me, but I thought it would be appropriate for you to have it. He did give me permission to gift it to Kaori. I put it on a necklace, so you don't have to wear it if you don't want to. Or if you don't want it to be seen."

With fascination he watched conflicting emotions fight out a quick and brutal battle on her face. There was the initial happiness, making her break out in a bright warm smile that he felt he hadn't seen in ages. A flicker of hope lit up in his chest. The feeling spread through his whole body and made his skin tingle. As quickly as it came, the expression vanished, replaced by a frown and a pondering look that seemed to be directed inwards. Eventually, her face relaxed into a well-known calm smile that betrayed no thoughts or feelings.

"I'm sure she would've liked it," she simply stated.

Jin's lips turned upwards. "And what do you think of it?"

An eyebrow was raised. "Me?" He nodded encouragingly. She eyed

the necklace for a long time, not diverging any of her thoughts. "It's a nice gesture. Thanks." With a smirk she added, "I can't wait to tell your father all about it."

He groaned, "Please don't. I want at least a few months of relief between his lectures. It would probably be healthier for all of us."

Despite being now married and expecting a baby, not much changed for Jin. He still went to work like always. Kaori still disappeared at odd times, just tended to come back a little earlier than usual. That was to say, not in the middle of the night. The weeks went by relatively uneventful. Nonetheless, or maybe for this exact reason, Jin felt like he should be doing more. Like he should be out there and do fatherly things. Prepare for what was to come. Busy his hands somehow. But all his suggestions for help got dismissed.

A sign that things had indeed changed, showed itself in August, about two and a half months after the news of the successful pregnancy. In the early morning, still a little groggy, Jin stumbled into the bathroom. He absentmindedly noticed that the toilet seat was up, but disregarded it, only thinking about how he couldn't wait to break down on it and wait a few more minutes of his morning before work. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark shape that wasn't supposed to be there. It was huddled in front of the bathtub. When it moved, he nearly jumped out of his skin. Squinting and blinking furiously, he forced his eyes to focus. It was Kaori. He picked sleep out of the corner of his eye, and grabbed his glasses from the mirror cabinet.

She was leaning against the wall of the bathtub, legs pulled in and head buried in her arms. Jin squatted down. "Are you okay?"

"s nothing, just morning sickness," she mumbled into her arms. That explained the toilet seat. He mentally kicked himself for not thinking sooner that this might happen.

"Do you need help? Can I get you anything?" he asked carefully.

"No, I have everything I need." To prove her point, she lifted a toothbrush cup filled with water from the ground next to her.

He edged closer and lightly touched her naked arm. The skin looked

paler than usual. There was a thin layer of cold sweat on it, and shivers ran through her from time to time. Her dark blue tank top was drenched. Jin wasn't an expert in these kinds of things, but this didn't seem normal. None of the books he had read had mentioned anything like it. Nausea and vomiting yes, but not to this degree.

"Are you sure you're alright? This seems a bit intense for morning sickness."

Kaori sighed. "The fetus is taking more nutrition than I expected, thereby exacerbating the usual symptoms, and this body can't keep up. Greedy little thing." She laughed weakly.

Now this was seriously worrying, and not something that sounded like a normal part of pregnancy. "Should I call a doctor? An ambulance?" Panic crept into his voice.

"No no, it's fine," she limply waved her hand in his general direction without looking up. "This is actually a good thing. I just didn't expect it to happen so fast, and to be this extreme. Seems like I need to adjust my diet." There was actual glee in her words. Like the prospect of the baby seeping up her energy was making her excited.

He frowned, and put his arm around her sticky shoulders, while running his fingers through her damp hair in an attempt to give her some warmth and comfort. "This doesn't sound normal to me. I think we should let a professional take a look at you and the baby."

She lifted her head a little, and smiled at him sweetly. "It's normal for our child. And since I'm the one keeping this body up and running, I know best what happens inside of it. The fetus is doing better than ever, don't worry."

None of that did anything to soothe his worries. Quite the opposite. Obviously, him expecting this to be like any other pregnancy, just with a bit of an unusual origin, had been naive. The way Kaori was talking, made him wonder what exactly was growing inside of her. Images of various horror movies flashed before his eyes. Gross deformed monsters burrowing their way out of their mother's guts, literally eating her from the inside out. Jin pinched his nose. Don't be silly. This wasn't anything like that. Things weren't as he had expected, but that was no reason to become dramatic.

"Well, that's good to know I guess," he started slowly. "Still, it has left you in a condition where you are barely able to move. How long have you been on this floor anyway?"

A shrug. "Don't know. Half an hour maybe." A pause. "You're right, I should get going." She took a deep gulp from her water cup and struggled up, using the wall of the bathtub as support. Half up, she froze, blinked a few times and then gradually sank back down. "On second thought, could you maybe bring me some miso soup? And my phone. It's in one of my jeans' pockets."

He forced a smile. "Of course. I'll be back in a minute."

Jin went into the kitchen and took a cup of instant miso soup from the cabinet. While the water boiled, he looked for Kaori's phone. Finding the discarded jeans proved more challenging than the phone itself, but he unearthed it eventually from under the bed. On the way back to the kitchen, he pondered the device, flipped it open, just to shut it again. Part of him was curious what she did with it and what sorts of people she contacted. Eventually, he opened it one last time and stared at the screen. Nothing interesting to see except for the time. 6:45. He needed to go to work soon.

Leaning against the kitchen board, letting the soup steep next to him, his finger was hovering over the button for the contact list. Taking a deep breath, he pressed it. The result proved meaningless. Just a list of single kanjis, numbers and symbols. Same turned out to be the case for the messages. Words added together in a way that didn't make any sense to him. He closed the phone again, guilt catching up to him. It was a violation of privacy. He shouldn't have done it. He was a terrible husband.

Armed with the cup of miso and the mobile device, Jin made his way back to the bathroom. Kaori hadn't moved significantly, she was now just leaning her head back against the bathtub instead of forward. With a short 'thanks' she took the items from him and had a sip from the cup. A few more, when it didn't seem like the fluid intended on working its way back up her throat.

She pressed a button to speed dial and held the phone to her ear. Jin sat down next to her, but kept a respectful distance, to not intrude too much on the conversation.

Someone picked up on the other side. "Hey, I've run into a bit of a problem. I need you to come over. ... Nothing serious, just cook for me. ... Well, I would prefer not to move too much for now. ... The fetus is taking up more of my energy than I anticipated, and I think you can provide me with the right diet." The person on the other end seemed to have a lot to say to that. Kaori rolled her eyes up to the



ceiling in good-natured exasperation, and drank a bit more of her soup. “No, it’s fine, really. ... Yes ... Really, the vessel is fine. It’s just that both it and I would be even better with your culinary support. ... Thanks.” To Jin’s horror, she gave the other the address of their apartment. “See you then.” She closed her phone and smiled at him. “Uraume will be coming over, and helping me out. I hope you don’t mind.”

Angry red eyes belonging to a teenage-looking monk flashed in Jin’s mind. He minded very much, but he didn’t feel like he had much choice in the matter. If it helped Kaori, he would just have to deal with it.

“No, that’s alright,” he replied meekly.

After drinking a few more gulps of soup, Kaori made another attempt at standing up. This time she was more successful. She swayed a little, and Jin jumped up to steady her. With his help she made it over to their bedroom and went about putting on a hoodie and sweatpants. He noticed the slight swell on her lower abdomen. Incredible how something so small could have such a huge impact.

Regardless of personal issues, Jin still had to go to work. Kaori assured him that Uraume was very well behaved and wouldn’t lay waste to their home. She was already looking a lot more lively. Colour had returned to her skin, and her walk was more assured. Currently, she was eating the rest of the *natto* they had had in the fridge. He would’ve thought that the beans would intensify the nausea, but its nutritive aspects seemed to overpower that.

His colleagues quickly noticed that something was up. He was inattentive and jittery for the whole day. Some had known Kaori quite well and showed sympathy for his situation, others just told him to stay away from their work, so he couldn’t mess it up even further. Eventually, his superior took pity on him and let him leave an hour early to take care of his wife. When he returned home in the evening, the first thing that greeted him was the heavy smell of spices. He could pick out oregano, thyme and coriander, but there was more he was unable to identify. Walking further into the apartment, he noticed Kaori sitting by the kitchen table, still in sweatpants and hoodie, surrounded by various thick notebooks. A half liter cup filled with some thick liquid waited next to her.

He poked his head into the kitchen. To his surprise there wasn't much difference except that it was cleaner than usual. Jin had forgotten how shiny the stove could be if you bothered to scrub off all the fat. A glance into the fridge told him what Kaori and Uraume had been doing. There was an array of Tupperware containers, all stacked neatly to take up as little space as possible. Randomly, he pulled one out and took a look inside. He closed the lid again. Then, slowly opened it back up. Yes, that was indeed a heart. A heart embedded in potatoes and various vegetables. After putting the box back into the fridge, he joined Kaori by the table.

"That is some interesting food Uraume cooked there."

"Yes, it's their specialty," she replied absent-mindedly, while flipping through an old-looking notebook.

"And eating organs will help you get better?" he asked incredulously.

Her gaze met his. "Of course, it's healthy. Aside from the protein, it is also rich in vitamins and minerals. Uraume tends to add their own little spin that improves the overall quality even more." She picked up the cup next to her and held it over the table towards him. "Try this."

He eyed the faint pink sludge inside. "What is that?"

"A smoothie."

"I mean, what's in it."

Kaori smiled secretively at him. "Taste it and tell me."

Jin was still skeptic. "There is no chili in it, right?"

She snorted, "No, not this time."

Hesitantly, he took the cup from her. When he swayed it from side to side, the liquid would leave red schlieren on the rim. It smelled a little fruity. He took a sip. The taste was quite sweet, but not sugary, instead originating from the different fruits that had been blended together. There was a heavier, more grounded aftertaste.

He tried a bit more, and then nodded satisfied. "It tastes good." Running his tongue over his lips, he reflected on the exact ingredients. "I would say raspberries, blueberries, orange?" Kaori nodded. "There's some more that I can't quite pick out, and the aftertaste is hard to pin down. Chocolate?"

She chuckled, like she was enjoying some private joke. “Close enough, I would say.”

He gave her back the cup. “As long as it helps.”

“It does. I think the fetus likes it.” Now she was definitely laughing at something Jin wasn’t privy to. “They gave me enough supplies for a month, but still insist on coming over every two weeks to cook more. Apparently, they don’t trust me too heat the meals up the way they want me to,” she gave him a good imitation of a pitying look. “Unfortunately, they didn’t consider you in all this, so you will have to make your own food.”

“I think I’ll manage,” he joked, “You enjoy your...organs and whatever else you have prepared. It is very nice of them though, preparing all this and taking care of you.” Whatever concerns he had about Uraume, it was good to have someone who could step in in an emergency.

Kaori waved him off with a laugh. “Oh, they aren’t doing this for me. All they care about is the wellbeing of our child. If it wasn’t inside of me, I could drop dead right now without them wasting a second thought on me.”

Jin frowned. “What do they want with our child?”

“Nothing really. You could say they are just excited to see it grow up.”

He didn’t like the sound of that, but it was clear that she wouldn’t get any more specific on this topic. If this meant Uraume would look out for their child, the details didn’t really matter, he supposed.

Changing the topic, he motioned to the books. “What are you doing here?”

“Writing down recent developments in the pregnancy and comparing it to my old notes,” she replied, picking up her pen again.

“Like what you gathered from studying in Chengdu?”

“Yes, that would be the oldest one.” She surveyed the scene before her and then picked out a yellowed book, whose pages were only being held together by thick strings. “This one.”

Seeing as she clearly wanted him to take a look, he accepted the offer, and carefully leafed through the stiff paper. Most of the writing was in

Chinese, but he noticed a few Japanese notes on the side here and there. Some must have been added at a later point, judging by the difference in ink colour. From what he could decipher, there was a lot written about the germ layer, something he could only very vaguely remember from biology classes in high school. It was accompanied by sketches of what he assumed to be cell structures. Other pages were entirely filled with a carousel of drawings of little worms and beans that likely were supposed to be embryos and fetuses.

It was still unreal to him that all this came from the person in front of him. He put the book back on the table, pulled over a chair, and directed his attention towards the mountain before him. In a way, this was similar to him going crazy over parental guides. Everyone had their own ways of preparing for the challenges before them. Who knows, he might be able to learn something from this. If he was able to read any of it.

Generally, he was more interested in the older notes, hoping to get a glimpse into her past. Most of it didn't prove very interesting though, just paragraphs upon paragraphs on cell structures, movement of egg and sperm, and various stages of different animal embryos. But one notebook made him freeze up. He knew this drawing, had seen it in greater detail before. In Tokyo. And indeed, when he turned the old pages, there were more sketches of those deformed fetuses. Panicked he looked up to Kaori, but she didn't seem to have noticed his distress. Or didn't care.

He read the words of the notebook more closely. The dates were from the early Meiji period. Descriptions and bullet points under it did little to build a clear narrative to him. Something about a girl getting cursed or having a curse put upon her and getting pregnant. Considering the political climate of that period, he wondered if 'curse' was code or a euphemism for something else. Kaori didn't seem the superstitious type. He also wasn't sure if she had cared for this pregnant girl or just simply happened to be in the vicinity and had written down her observations. The only direct involvement he could find, was her helping the other with aborting those fetuses.

Further to the front of the book, he found another sketch, dating back to Meiji year 5. The body was just as horrific as the others, but differentiated itself by being further developed. Jin almost thought it to be an infant, if its appearance didn't make him question how it would have even been able to survive that long. Its head was quite large, making the bone-thin body seem all the smaller in comparison. The eyes were nothing more than giant sunken holes, no indication of

eyeballs. Instead of a nose it had a gnarly wound, and the lack of lips revealed rows of blunt teeth that shouldn't belong to a baby. Despite all that, it looked more human than the fetuses he had seen before. The drawing alone made Jin nauseous. He didn't even want to think about what it might have looked like in person.

Hesitantly, he cleared his throat. "What is this?" he croaked and held up the book.

Kaori lifted her head and lazily took in the drawing. "Ah, that's just a case of neonatal death I came across. As you might've guessed, it was nonviable."

"And you decided to sketch it?" Jin said in disbelief, thinking about how crass it would be to study a dead child, as gruesome as it might look, right next to the grieving mother.

"Sure. You don't often find infants like that. Usually, the family tries to hide those instances. The pregnancy was quite unusual too, as you might be able to gather from my notes. Its mother was basically begging me to take it from her," she elaborated with a calmness that was in stark contrast to the subject matter.

He turned the page back and squinted at the lines of writing there. Apparently, the baby had developed too quickly, and had been delivered far earlier than it was supposed to. While it had been alive during the bloody birthing process, it had died soon afterwards. Jin's eyes wouldn't leave the paragraph about the rapidly growing fetus. A cold shudder ran through him.

"You wrote that the baby developed unusually fast," he licked his lips, his mouth was like a desert, "that wouldn't...our child doesn't look like this...does it?" His eyes were barely able to focus on her, his heart was beating too fast.

She dismissed his anxiety. "Of course not. Why would it?"

"Well," he pressed his fingers into the spine of the book, "Our baby is taking up more nutrients than would be normal, and is developing rather quickly. Isn't that similar to this case?"

"No," she retorted with a smile. "It simply needs some extra protein to built up its strength, it is not actually growing faster. The development is natural so far and I see no reason why that would change."

Jin released a shaky breath, and allowed himself to relax a bit more.

“So everything’s normal? Some complications along the way, but aside from that, they are like any other child.”

She leaned her head on her hand and fixated him with half-lidded eyes. Her mouth stretched too wide. “It is our child. Nothing about it is normal.”

As if that instance hadn’t been concerning enough, the following months heaped more and more stress on Jin’s shoulders. Uraume proved to be both a relief and a burden to him. Usually, they showed up when he was at work, so they rarely met each other, the gaining and waning presence of tupperware containers the only proof of their visits. While he understood the importance of meat-based meals, he didn’t like looking at the more raw and bloody variations of them. Knowing the health benefits of hearts, brains and other innards was one thing, having to look at them in their unchanged form, another. Kaori didn’t seem bothered. At least it was clearly helping her. No more incidents of fainting or vomiting, and no indication that she was losing in strength.

The few times he did meet the youthful monk, they both only exchanged a couple of words and held a safe distance between them. To be fair, the pregnancy seemed to have elevated Uraume’s image of him, but nonetheless, Jin couldn’t shake the feeling that they only really cared about the child growing inside of Kaori, and saw both the mother and father as expandable. Obstacles they had to arrange themselves with for the time being. While Uraume actually appeared more concerned for the child’s safety than Kaori at times, treating her as almost fragile and not wanting her to put too much stress on her body, he still didn’t trust them to have the best intentions.

Aside from the fussing monk, the further progression of the pregnancy and the steady growth of the child caused him quite a few sleepless nights as well. The other two assured him that everything was going fine, but it was becoming quite clear that they had differing definitions of that word.

Winter was approaching inexorably, the days becoming colder and darker, and not helping in elevating Jin’s thoughts. One afternoon, after he had come back from grocery shopping, he found Kaori sitting on the living room floor, legs crossed, back straight, hands resting on

her knees, and her eyes closed to nearly imperceivable slits. Looking at her caused a numb throbbing pain in his temples. Depending on the angle, it almost seemed as if the air around her was shivering like heat rising up from asphalt on a hot summer day. He took a few steps closer, avoiding her line of sight so as to not distract her.

“What are you doing?” he mumbled, instinctively lowering his voice to not shatter the tense atmosphere.

It took her a moment to answer. “Focusing.”

“Focusing?”

“Or meditating.” A short pause. “Whichever you prefer.”

“Why?” he whispered back. Meditation actually seemed like a good idea, after all, some mothers apparently did yoga during pregnancy, but he had never seen her do it before, and also vaguely remembered her not speaking in the best terms of it. The strange distortion of air around her unnerved him a bit as well.

She opened her eyes a little more, her breathing became less shallow. “To keep the fetus calm and hopefully make it go back to sleep.” The flow of air around her normalized, and the strain on his mind eased up. “Give it a few minutes and I can show you why.”

Jin made himself comfortable next to her. “Have you tried classical music? I read it’s supposed to be good for children of any age.”

Kaori folded her hands in her lap, and gave a dark laugh. “I did. Haven’t noticed any significant changes so far.”

He studied the swell of Kaori’s belly. They had almost reached six months now. Time seemed to fly, soon he would be able to see his child with his own eyes. Excitement and anxiousness churned in his heart. He wanted to hold his baby in his arms, but he was also afraid of finding out what lay at the end of this strange pregnancy.

A sudden flinch in Kaori expression ripped him from his circling thoughts. She grabbed his wrist, and guided his hand to her belly. At first he couldn’t feel anything except her steady breaths and body heat. Then, something struck his palm. He recoiled, and cradled his assaulted hand.

“Was that...?” he stared at the area the motion had come from.

“Yes,” she answered his unspoken question. “Quite the brash welcome.” Her laugh sounded a little strained.

Hesitantly, Jin stroked his hand over her belly again. He could make out little bumps under her skin, some bigger than others. One of the smaller ones started to move again. Kaori lifted her sweater, and he watched in unnerved fascination how her body twisted and turned from within.

“Does that hurt?” he asked breathlessly.

Her smile became crooked. “Well, it’s not pleasant, but I’ll manage. This is better than the kicking it did before.” She trailed a finger along the area where most of the movement was happening. The baby’s stirring halted for a moment before resuming in a seemingly less intense manner. “While I appreciate it’s growing strength, I would prefer if it waited with acting out until it has been born.” A light dab of her finger against one of the bulges on her belly caused it to disappear.

Jin stroked what he assumed to be the head of the baby. Despite the strong movements, what little he could make out of the body still felt so fragile and helpless. “I can’t wait to meet you.”

A light smile spread over his lips, accompanied by a fluttering warmth in his chest. It was true, he discovered to his surprise. Despite his worries about Kaori’s safety, this was still his child. Touching them, even with the layer of flesh in between, cemented the feeling that no matter what the baby would be or look like, he would always love them.

“I think it likes you,” Kaori commented. “Do you want to know the sex?”

He met her eyes. “You can tell?”

“At this stage, yes.”

Thoughtfully he looked down at her belly again, caressing the bigger bump at the side. “No. I will find out soon enough. It’s not that important anyway.”

Kaori hummed in agreement.



New Year's came and went in a flash. Feeling his family duties bear down on him, Jin finally called his father. He focused solely on the most important parts. Delivering the new year's wishes, assuring him of his health and safety, and giving a short update on the pregnancy. All further questions about his relationship with Kaori were successfully shut down. Their marriage was still not something he felt like telling his father about. Of course he also didn't mention any of his concerns regarding the nature of his child.

When spring was knocking on their door, and the first cherry blossoms started blooming, the date of the birth of the newest member of the Itadori family also came ever closer. While Kaori was good at hiding any pain she was experiencing, Jin didn't miss the odd twitch in her face or the grinding of her teeth that made a more regular appearance as time went on.

He busied himself with preparing everything for the new addition to the family, buying furniture, clothes and toys. Finally something that made him feel normal. Giddy in a way a new father was supposed to be. High-strung because he wanted to provide for his child in the best way possible, and not because he worried if the baby was really human. Most of the decisions and purchases were done by him alone with Kaori only providing financial aid. She claimed he just had a better eye for these kinds of things. With the increasing agitation of the baby, he could understand that she didn't want to go out too much.

The only thing she did take a decisive stance on was baby food. Jin wasn't allowed to buy false milk from the store, instead she presented him with a nondescript white box with faint yellow powder inside. Apparently, she had created this formula herself and customized it to fit their child's needs perfectly. This was likely a similar situation to Uraume's special diet. While still skeptical, Jin thought it couldn't hurt to try it out and see how the baby would react. After all, so far their child seemed to be more than well, if anything it was Kaori he was worried about. Once the child had been born that wouldn't be a problem anymore.

On March 20th at around five in the morning, Jin was roughly shaken awake. Blinking drowsily into the glaring light of the bedroom, he could vaguely make out the looming form of Kaori above him.

"The child is coming. Get dressed. We need to go to a hospital," she

commanded in a husky tone.

It took a few seconds for the meaning of her words to sink in. Once the message had been received, Jin threw back the covers and jumped into action, spurred on by the adrenaline pumping through his veins. While he hastily struggled into his clothes, Kaori leaned against the wall of the hallway, focusing on steadily breathing in and out. When he put on his glasses, he could see that there was already sweat accumulating on her forehead, and dark circles had formed under her eyes. She must have been awake for a while. A bag with a change of clothes for Kaori and the newborn was sitting by her feet.

“How are you feeling? Do you know how much time you still have? Has the water already broken? Do you feel the need to push?” Jumbled thoughts spilled out all at once. Knowledge he had picked up from books became muddled by his own turbulent feelings.

“The water broke about two hours ago. I don’t feel the need to push, but it will likely happen soon,” she answered, way calmer than he currently felt.

“Already?” he exclaimed in disbelief, jumping in place while trying to fumble on his shoes. “Why didn’t you wake me sooner?”

“I want to spend as little time as possible in the hospital. I’m only going there to have it on official record anyway,” she explained, and walked on unsteady legs to the door.

Jin grabbed his keys and the bag with clothes, and opened the door for her. Together, they slowly worked their way down the stairwell to the parking lot in front of the apartment complex. Inside the car, he helped Kaori with the seatbelt before starting the motor and driving in the direction of Sugisawa hospital.

The expecting mother leaned her head against the window, and repressed a groan. “It’s ironic how birth is more painful than abortion. Giving life is more difficult than taking it. Although abortion isn’t really taking a life, since the embryo or fetus couldn’t yet exist on it’s own anyway. But generally speaking, the act of destruction is always easier than building something new. Or creating something new.”

She was probably trying to distract herself from the pain, so Jin just let her monolog, and only made affirming noises from time to time, focusing on the street in front of him instead. A creaking noise made him glance to the side. Kaori was gripping the handle of the door, knuckles white. It didn’t look like the device would be able to take

much more.

“Please don’t destroy the car,” he only half joked. Grudgingly, she released the piece of plastic and dug her nails into the plush of the seat instead.

At the hospital, everything went very fast. Jin had no choice but be swept away by all the commotion. He briefly reflected how this was now the second time that this hospital saw a member of his family come to life, before the chaos around him pulled him deeper into the maternity ward. By the time that he found himself in the clean delivery room, the pushing had already begun. Since the transition stage of active labor had almost passed when they arrived in the hospital, the usual blood tests had to be skipped for now, and the check-ups of child and mother’s health were done in a speedrun. Between strenuous breaths, Kaori explained the child’s and her own situation to the nurses. She refused any medication aside from an IV drip for hydration.

He didn’t know how long it took. Maybe a few minutes, maybe hours. There wasn’t much he could do, except stay by Kaori’s side, and whisper encouraging words. She was drenched in sweat by now, her hair sticking to her face and hiding most of the scar tissue that stretched across her forehead. Aside from him, there were two more nurses with them that checked dilation and gave her instructions about breathing techniques and positions that would help ease the delivery process. That advice wasn’t very appreciated. If anything, it seemed to grate on Kaori’s nerves.

Painful groans filled the air. Jin clasped her hand in a weak show of support. In return, he almost got his bones crushed. At least now she wasn’t the only one suffering. The ache of his joints almost forced Jin to his knees, but he told himself to suck it up.

“It’s moving too much,” she hissed under her breath, “If it just held still, I could push it out, but it’s being defiant.” Her lips pulled back into a feral grin. “There is no use in hiding. You will have to get out eventually, come on.”

Jin looked in concern to the end of the bed she was lying on. “The head is coming out,” the nurse closest to her legs encouraged her.

Kaori threw her head back as an intense shudder went through her. His vision began to swim, and darkness crept on the edges of his sight. The hand she was clutching went completely numb. He hazily

registered the lack of feeling climbing up his arm to his shoulder. One of the nurses stumbled back, hit the wall, and limply slit to the ground.

Forcing himself to focus his thoughts, Jin pressed out. "What are you doing?"

Feeling returned to his arm, and his vision slowly began to clear again, the dark edges disappearing.

"Sorry. Lost control for a second. The head is out," Kaori rasped.

The nurse who was still conscious threw a glance at her colleague, but then decided to first attend to the child that was about to see the light of the world.

"I can see the shoulders. Just a few more pushes and the baby is out," she said. While she was supporting the small head that became more and more visible between the legs, she made sure not to touch Kaori.

Less than a minute later, a high-pitched cry could be heard. All three conscious people in the room breathed a sigh of relief. Kaori let go of his hand. Jin tested its movement, flexing his fingers as best as possible. That would definitely leave some bruises. After resting a few more moments, the umbilical cord was cut, and he was handed a fluffy bundle with a pink, slimy, scrunched up face peeking out of it. Distantly, he registered the nurse congratulating them and saying it was a boy, but his gaze was glued to the most perfect thing he had ever seen in his life.

It had finally happened. He was really a father. He held his son in his arms. Thin strands of light hair, so similar to his own, framed the face. Tentatively, he stroked his son's cheeks. His finger looked gigantic next to the small nose. The boy opened his eyes, and squinted up at him. He probably couldn't see much of his surroundings yet. His eyes were light brown, bordering on amber. Just like Kaori's.

How could he have ever doubted the outcome of this pregnancy. How could he have ever doubted the humanity of his child. It was clear for all to see that this was his and Kaori's son. Nothing more, and nothing less. All thoughts of inhuman-looking fetuses and dead infants were forgotten as he held his newborn son.

"Hey little one, I'm your dad," he whispered. The child silently blinked up at him, still exhausted from fighting his way into this world.

High laughter pulled him out of his reverence. The baby's mother, his wife, had one arm thrown over her face, only revealing the mouth opened in triumphant glee.

"Finally," she exclaimed. "Finally, finally."

Something told him that she wasn't just celebrating the successful delivery.

After she moved to a regular patient room, Jin had returned back home to get supplies for his stay at the hospital. She was alone for now, with only one currently unoccupied bed as company. Kenjaku didn't plan on dawdling around here for too long, but one night was indeed needed. The sweat and grime was washed away, making her overall feel much cleaner, but even with reversed curse technique, the exhaustion from the last hours was still sitting deep in her bones. Pregnancy and birth was nothing to be taken lightly. Especially not when delivering the vessel for the 'King of Curses'.

Focusing positive energy to her head, she further smoothed out the scar tissue there. By now, only the faintest outline of the places where the stitches had been should be visible. They lifted their hand towards the white ceiling, flexing and stretching their fingers in the light. Being accustomed to moving around with extra weight for the past months made their movements seem so much lighter now by comparison. There was also nothing eating at their energy reserves anymore. Kenjaku looked down at the small thing lying on their stomach, clad in a white onesie and half hidden under the bed covers. It was hiding its face in her too large t-shirt - a left-over from a past host - but wasn't fully asleep.

This body had done what it was supposed to do. It was time to move on. Soon. First she had to make sure that the child properly settled into its new life. His new life, she reminded herself. Her son. Motherhood was a strange concept. This would definitely take some getting used to. Fortunately, Jin was there to do the heavy lifting in terms of emotional care for the boy.

Kenjaku pulled up her legs, and carefully maneuvered the infant out from underneath the blanket to lean against her thighs, his sides still supported by her hands. Now that the vernix was gone and the

reddening had receded, you could see how much he took after his father. The face shape and hair especially, although there was a hint of brown at the roots, likely caused by Kaori's genes. Just like the eyes that were currently looking tiredly around the room, before falling on his mother.

The delivery seemed to have exhausted him quite a lot - his own fault for struggling so much - but he was gradually recovering now. He looked a bit more like he was actively registering his surroundings. Kenjaku wiggled a finger in front of his eyes until his gaze zeroed-in on it. Slowly, she moved her hand from left to right, and watched how he followed the motion. He even limply lifted his forearm, although not in a manner that matched what she was doing. She dropped the hand. The boy looked down, but when she didn't do anything interesting, his gaze wandered up to her eyes again. Kenjaku smiled at him. A twitch in his cheeks and awkward movement of his lips indicated that he tried to replicate the expression. So he could already recognize facial features. Good. He was not only quickly developing physically, but mentally too. That further decreased the chances that she would need to repeat this experiment.

A cold whiff of air made her look over to the entrance of the room. Uraume was standing in the doorway like the ghost of a dead child. They closed the door behind them and joined Kenjaku's bedside in long strides.

"That took longer than I thought. I was almost expecting you to show up as soon as I pushed out the kid," she greeted them.

The monk didn't answer, just took in the infant in her lap. Their expression wasn't exactly excited, more enchanted. She couldn't understand why. For now, he barely differentiated himself from regular infants. Hesitantly, the other reached out, and carefully lifted the child up into their arms. Kenjaku watched with interest how their face softened further when they made eye contact with the boy.

"Sukuna-sama," they whispered.

"Not yet," she reminded them. "And won't be for a while."

Uraume hummed. "But we finally have a vessel. You actually did it."

Kenjaku crossed her arms behind her head. "Of course. I made a binding vow after all."

They gave them a sidelong glance. "Still no reason to expect you to

deliver what was agreed upon. You have a tendency to get fussy with the details.” She gave them a bright smile, making them huff in exasperation. “At least this step of the plan is taken care of.”

“Yes. Time to move on to more important things.” Uraume frowned at them, apparently interpreting those words as a slight at Sukuna. “Like the Six Eyes,” she clarified.

They hummed again, letting her comment slide this once. Kenjaku stretched out her arms, and Uraume reluctantly handed her back the child. She studied him again, one hand underneath his neck and head, and the other supporting his back and hips. Still so small. He couldn’t even swallow solid food, much less a finger.

“It’s kind of fascinating, isn’t it? He is Sukuna’s future vessel, but right now his body is still so fragile. I could simply take away my right hand, and gravity would break his neck,” she chuckled. “Then Jin and I would have to start all over again.”

Before she had even finished the last sentence, she could already feel the sharp coldness on her temple, sizzling against the tender scar there. Her eyes wandered up to meet Uraume’s red murderous stare. “Don’t even think about it,” they hissed. “I will lobotomize you, before you can so much as lift a finger.”

She gave them a wide smile. “It was a joke, Uraume. Just a bit of lighthearted fun. You are so touchy when it comes to him.”

The ice retracted by a fraction, but didn’t fully disappear. “You always had a twisted sense of humor,” the monk commented darkly. “And it is particularly hard to judge how serious you are with this topic. It’s not like this would be your first infanticide. Also, didn’t you force nine iterations of the Death Paintings before giving up?”

“Yes, but pregnancy isn’t so thrilling of an experience that I would go through it twice if I don’t have to,” they pointed out. Kenjaku put the infant down with a great show of care. His stomach was now resting on their chest, and his head lying on their shoulder. He made a gurgling sound, and stirred to get more comfortable. “You do understand that I can’t handle him with kid gloves if he’s supposed to become a proper vessel.”

Uraume crossed their arms, hands disappearing in their sleeves. “I know. Just don’t kill him.”

Kenjaku sighed. “If you can’t trust in my unwillingness to kill this

child, trust in my unwillingness to sabotage myself.”

The other made a nondescript sound. After running their hand down the back of the boy one last time, they turned around and disappeared without another word, leaving her alone with her son again.

All this didn't seem to have disturbed the child one bit. He had already gone back to sleep, fists scrunched in her tee, and slightly drooling into the fabric. Kenjaku took the time to rest a bit more as well, thoughts circling around the actions of the next months. Plans developing in greater and greater detail.

About an hour later, the infant made himself known again. It started as simple restlessness, but when that didn't help, he whimpered until his voice rose to a full-on cry. They sat up a little more and studied the red face. He must be hungry. The infant milk they had prepared was still at the apartment, and it would take until the evening for Jin to sort out the situation at his workplace, resolve personal issues with his father, and bring the supplies to the hospital. Letting the child cry until then would rouse suspicion. Asking the nurses for formula would cause questions as to why they didn't just nurse their son themselves, resulting in possibly more investigations into their health.

Kenjaku looked down at their screaming son. “This is a one-time deal,” they explained. “Don't expect me to do this for you again.”

With a much reluctance, they lifted their t-shirt, and held the boy closer to their chest. The crying stopped. They stared up at the ceiling, and tried to ignore the pulling on their skin. It really was time to change bodies.

After returning home, one of the first things he had done was put an ice pack on his throbbing hand. The euphoria helped keep the pain away, but the damage Kaori had done couldn't be ignored forever. Blue and purple blotches were already starting to appear on his knuckles and the back of his hand.

Getting a few days off work had proven to be relatively easy, since he had already announced that he would need to take two days towards the end of March. That just left the last papers for paternity leave, but they could wait for another day. The talk with his father had proven



to be relatively civil too. Jin's excitement had mellowed the tense atmosphere between them, and the newly turned grandfather would visit them in the hospital tomorrow. Even through the phone it had been obvious that the old man was quite eager to see his grandson, be it out of concern or joy.

This was the first time that Jin actually looked forward to visiting Sugisawa hospital. The oppressive air didn't bother him like it usually did. Feeling light as a feather, he practically skipped over to the elevators, the bag of supplies swinging in his uninjured hand. He had brought a change of clothes for himself, Kaori and the baby, as well as toothbrushes and the special baby formula.

Opening the door with the name "Itadori" on it, he found Kaori sitting cross legged on her bed, leaning over their son, mumbling indistinct words to him. The light of the setting sun that fell through the window painted the scene in a bright orange. She was wearing an, ill-fitting wine-red t-shirt that he had never seen before. The blanket had been pulled back to make more space, and so the baby was resting on the straight surface of the mattress. His legs were put up against his mother's legs, and she was holding his tiny hands between two fingers, using them to rotate his arms in circular motions.

Jin curiously walked closer. Her forehead had healed further. He could make out faint lines where the stitches used to be, but aside from that, she looked untouched. From a certain angle he could almost convince himself that this was Kaori as she used to be, playing with their child. But no, her eyes - the eyes she had given their child - and her expression were too different to ignore. Despite the physical similarity, he knew who was before him. At this point he could recognize her by her posture alone. It didn't even bother him. She had helped bring his son to life, she had a right to be here. He was as much her son, as he was his and Kaori's.

She didn't let his entrance distract her, and continued telling her strange story, while engaging the child in basic physical therapy.

"While the boy was still young he did not understand much about his body. Satisfied that there were surely others like him, he continued to conduct himself as he chose. Gradually, however, he learned about other people, and after much thought came to realize that he was very different. Even so, though he thought much on the subject, there was nothing he could do. He grieved, asking himself why he was unusual and different from others. He restrained himself, kept his distance from the other men, and was somber."

Not understanding the depressing words, the child squeaked and gurgled happily as his arms were moved in the rhythm of his mother's words, his feet bobbing up and down with the slight movements of her legs.

"You two seem to be having fun," Jin greeted, and put the bag next to the bed.

Kaori looked up. "Since he's such an active child, he needs to learn how to move his limbs properly, now that he is outside of the constraints of my body."

Jin ran his fingers through the fluffy hair of his son, causing those bright amber eyes to be directed at him. So innocent and optimistic, just like Kaori's used to be. He pushed down the twinge of sorrow, and remarked instead, "That story you're telling him sounds quite bleak. Are you sure this is appropriate? He is not even a day old."

She turned back to the boy and smiled. "The content of what I'm saying doesn't really matter. I'm just trying to engage him mentally. The more we talk to him, the easier it will be for him to learn to speak."

He nodded, having read the same thing in one of his many library books. "But I don't want his first words to revolve around despair over his own body. More casual conversation or just regular children's books might be better."

Sliding his healthy palm underneath the baby's head, he moved his little body further to the side so he could sit on the bed as well, and took one of the infant's hands between his thumb and index finger. With him holding the boy's left hand and Kaori his right, they actually looked like a real family. A radiant smile spread across Jin's face. Over a year ago, before Kaori's accident, a scene like this had seemed impossible. He lovingly ran his thumb over the child's minute knuckles.

Kaori glanced at his swollen and bruised hand. "What happened to you?"

He clenched his fingers a little. "It's nothing. I was just suffering through the pains of childbirth with you."

She lifted an eyebrow, and pulled his hand closer. Hot fingertips danced over the swollen flesh. A prickling feeling spread through him, and in less than a second, the bruises were gone. The swelling had

receded too. It was as if nothing had ever happened. His joints felt better than they had in years. Jin flexed his hand, shook it, everything was fine. “Wow,” he exclaimed. “That’s amazing. How did you do that?”

“Similar to how I revived Kaori’s body,” she said with a sly smile.

He met her eyes. Suddenly, the events of the last months became much clearer to him. All this was her doing. If she hadn’t revived Kaori, revived their relationship, and persisted through this challenging pregnancy, he wouldn’t be here today, and he would have never had the chance to hold his son. The chain with the wedding ring underneath his turtleneck felt hot against his skin.

On impulse, he slid his healed hand behind her neck and pulled her into a deep kiss that was eagerly reciprocated. Their lips and tongues met in familiar playfulness, both soothing and explorative. Jin was the first to break away. He leaned his forehead against hers. “Thank you,” he breathed. She chuckled in reply.

Looking to the side, his gaze fell on his son again, who was squinting up at the ceiling. Reluctantly, he pulled away from Kaori. “We still have to think of a name for him,” he noted.

His wife wiped her glistening lips, and made a sound of agreement. “Do you have something in mind?”

Jin moved his son’s arm back and forth in thought. “I was thinking of something with ‘yuu’. Permanence and calm. So he will have a long, easygoing life.”

Kaori looked down at the boy. “Not a bad choice. How about ‘Yuuji’? ‘Ji’ coming from you. ‘Jin’.”

His eyes widened. Self-consciously, he fumbled with his glasses. It felt like a big gesture. “That...” he looked between his son and his wife, “Humanity and compassion. I like that.” His ears felt hot. In a way, this would mean that no matter what, part of him would always live on in his son.

“Do an act of benevolence at the sacrifice of oneself,” she mumbled.

Jin blinked. “What?”

“It’s from the Lun Yu,” she elaborated, still fixing the child with her stare.

“Oh,” he nervously licked his lips. “Well, that is a noble sentiment, but I would prefer to not put this much pressure on him. There is no reason for him to sacrifice himself for anything. I also don’t think my father had that in mind when naming me.”

“Maybe...” She finally looked up at him, her eyes unreadable. “But that’s what the ‘yuu’ is for,” she cocked her head, her smile sharp. “A long life.”

Jin slowly circled his son’s hand with his thumb. “Yes. Although I would like to think of it more as ‘eternal compassion’ or ‘eternal humanity’.” A deep breath. “So, Yuuji it is?”

Kaori trailed a finger over the boy’s head. “Yuuji it is.”

Despite there being another bed, Jin spent the night huddled together in Kaori’s, Yuuji secured tightly between the two. It was a strange and exhilarating feeling to have the young life so close to him, knowing that he had helped create it. Knowing that Kaori and him had created it together. The reality of it all would need a few days or months to really settle in. To make him realize that this wasn’t just a dream, that he really had a son now.

Jin had already gotten his first glimpses at fatherhood, when tasked to feed the boy and later change his diapers. Kaori happily left it all to him, only helping with the preparation of the milk, but otherwise keeping her distance. Whatever she put in the soy based powder, Yuuji seemed to like it. He was eagerly drinking without any signs of displeasure or illness so far. One of the nurses thankfully helped him clean up the baby afterwards, showing him a few neat tricks for how to do it faster and safer next time.

In the morning, Kaori changed into the black jeans he had brought her, and then scrutinized the equally dark long-sleeve t-shirt that had come with it.

“Is something wrong? Should I have picked something else?” he asked, while gently swaying Yuuji in his lap.

She didn’t immediately answer, but then scrunched the long-sleeve under her arm and began rummaging through the bag she had

brought with her to the hospital.

“No. It’s fine.” Having found what she had been looking for, she disappeared with it and the piece of clothing in the bathroom.

When she reappeared a few minutes later, now all in black, something about her was different. It took him a while to realise that it was her chest. With the loose clothing she had worn previously he hadn’t noticed it, but it now almost looked flatter than before the pregnancy, and Kaori had never had all that much in the first place. This would explain why she preferred baby formula over breastfeeding. Jin wasn’t sure how to react to this change. Should he say something? He decided to leave it for now. If there was an issue, she would surely bring it up to him.

His father showed up around lunch time. Jin was holding Yuuji in the crook of his arm, telling him whatever came to mind. What he had had for breakfast, an upcoming movie he was excited to see, a loose retelling of a children’s book about a talking panda. It was hard to judge how thrilling the boy thought his stories to be, but he was nonetheless looking up to his father for most of the time, indicating that he likely noticed that someone was talking to him. Kaori was lazily lying beside him, one leg pulled up and the other crossed over it. She was writing something on her phone while still half-listening to what he was saying to Yuuji, looking over to them from time to time.

The door opened, and Jin was face-to-face with his father for the first time in almost a year. He looked more haggard than he remembered, the lines in his face deeper, the shadows under his eyes darker. Was he imagining it or was there more gray in his hair than before? His cheekbones were sharper too, he had likely lost some weight. Jin felt a pang of guilt, but quickly pushed the feeling aside. It was his father’s own fault for causing stress where there didn’t need to be any.

For several moments, nothing happened. Wasuke was still standing by the door, Jin and Kaori turned to him expectantly. The air was tense. Yuuji made a gurgling sound and twitched in his father’s arms.

The old man sighed and walked closer. “Well, let me see my grandson.”

When he stopped in front of the bed, Jin turned further around and carefully handed the small child over into more experienced arms. His father’s gaze briefly flickered over to Kaori, who was still lying on the

bed, watching the exchange take place with an unreadable expression. Then he gave his full attention to the baby. His grip was strong to keep the boy safe, but gentle enough to not cause him any discomfort. The hint of a smile played around his lips. Yuuji blinked up at the foreign person.

“What’s his name?” asked the grandfather, his voice uncharacteristically soft.

“Yuuji,” replied Jin, tone full of pride.

The other hummed. “A kind name. ‘Ji’ like Jin, I assume?” His son nodded. “He does look a lot like you. Hopefully will take on your best qualities too.” He threw a glance over to Kaori again. “I’m glad to see he doesn’t have your eyes.”

Her lips turned up. “Not yet.”

Wasuke frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean.” It wasn’t a question, he clearly understood what it was supposed to mean.

Jin groaned. Could the two not have one conversation without antagonizing each other? Yuuji saved the situation by whining and wiggling his arms a little. The old man saw this as a sign to hand the child back to his father.

“He is surprisingly alert for being barely more than 24 hours old,” he remarked.

Jin nodded. “I think he even recognizes our faces,” he motioned to Kaori and himself.

“Yuuji is a special child,” his wife agreed. The grandfather threw her a dark glare.

Trying to change the topic, he patted at the pockets of his jacket. “You didn’t tell me the gender until yesterday evening, so I wasn’t sure what to buy for the kid.” A stuffed white rabbit toy appeared from the depths of his pocket. Its material was smooth and soft, devoid of any hairs Yuuji might accidentally breathe in.

Jin’s face brightened. “Thank you. It’s cute. I’m sure he will love it.” He put the plushie on Yuuji’s chest. The boy looked at it with interest, one of his arms moved a little bit as if trying to touch it.

Cooing over him, Jin tried to engage the child a little bit more with

the toy. His father looked down at them with a faint smile. "I knew you would make a good father."

After the last check-ups, the Itadori family was good to return home. Jin had already gone ahead with Yuuji to handle the paperwork. Wasuke lingered behind in the room with the mother of his grandson. Although he wasn't sure if it was even justified calling her 'mother'. He doubted there was an actual genetic link. How could there be? This person had no material presence outside of Kaori's body.

Even if there was a link, she certainly didn't act very maternal. What little interaction he had seen had looked very distant. Like Yuuji was an exotic animal in a terrarium not a person, much less a son to her.

"Let me ask you a question," he broke the silence.

She looked up from the shoelaces of her sneakers and cocked an eyebrow.

"Do you actually love Yuuji? Do you see him as your son?"

Without much haste, she finished tying her shoes, and then turned around to him, leaning back on the bed. "Of course he is my son. I went through quite a lot of trouble birthing him."

Wasuke didn't relent. "But do you love him?"

She looked off to the side for a moment, like she was actually considering the question. "Does it matter? I will always look out for him in one way or another. What does how I may or may not feel about him have to do with it?"

"So you don't love him."

"Again. What does it matter?"

"If you love him, you would want to avoid hurting him," he said darkly.

"Now that's not true," she retorted. "There are countless parents who hurt their children despite loving them. Many crimes are done out of love, it's not a failsafe against abuse."

“So you won’t hurt him?” Wasuke challenged. “You might not love him, but you will let him grow up like any other boy? Let him become an adult with a regular job, and peacefully sit back while he lives a long and fulfilling life?”

She smiled. “Yes.”

The old man clenched his teeth. “You’re lying. And you’re not even trying to hide it.”

A shrug. “I know I am not the best at handling kids. Really, how well his life turns out depends on you. You will be the one raising him after all.”

Wasuke narrowed his eyes. “That again. What about Jin?”

“Sorry. You and Jin.” She leaned towards him, her smile soft, eyelids lowered. “Raise Yuuji to be an honest, upstanding man, and there is nothing to worry about. He is his own person, right? In the future he should be able to make his own decisions. And he’s a strong boy. Will only become stronger with time. What could I then possibly do to hurt him? I’m not some omnipotent god. If he refuses to cooperate with me, there is not much I can do.”

The man instinctively recoiled. Clearly she was trying to manipulate him, but to what end? What was her goal? If he just made sure that Yuuji stayed away from her, would that really be enough? It was unlikely that she would stay here with them forever, now that whatever plan she had was coming to fruition. Depending on when she left, the boy might not even remember her. Would it really be possible for him to raise the kid in a way that prevented him from falling to her influence? Or was that exactly what she wanted? Was she really unable to do anything if Yuuji refused to cooperate with her plans in the future? He didn’t even know what she was capable of. So far he hadn’t seen her do anything extraordinary aside from taking possession of a dead body and wrapping Jin around her finger. The first one wasn’t much of a threat in itself, and the last one unfortunately quite easy, especially while wearing Kaori’s face.

Second-guessing wasn’t taking him anywhere. Even if it was exactly what she wanted him to do, making a just man out of Yuuji was the best option for now. The alternative would be playing into her hand even more. He just hoped it was enough to thwart whatever she had in store for the infant. Ideally, he would pull Jin away from her influence too, but if that proved impossible, he had to at least save the



child.

He returned his attention to the woman in front of him. “You will regret toying with Jin. You will regret ever having come close to my family.”

She cocked her head to the side, unimpressed. “Regret, huh. I can’t wait to find out what that feels like.”

Wasuke briskly turned around, and stormed out of the room.

Jin idly roamed around the open entrance area of the hospital, waiting for his wife and father to catch up to him. The formalities were done and nothing was holding them back anymore from bringing Yuuji home. Their bags were already waiting in the car. He was anxious and excited to bring his son to the place where he would be spending the next years of his life. There was so much he wanted to show him, so much he wanted to teach him. With time he could surely also get Kaori to be more engaged with him. On more than a purely educational basis.

He smiled down at the sleeping boy in his arms, tightly tucked in the baby wrap to shield him against the still cool spring air. To liven up the space and celebrate the season, the hospital staff had put vases with cherry blossom twigs around the rooms and hallways. The color of the petals almost matched Yuuji’s hair.

Hurried footsteps drew nearer. “Jin. Oi, Jin!”

The young father repressed a sigh. He really couldn’t leave the two alone. “Yes, father? If it’s about her, I’m leaving.”

His father stopped a couple of meters away. A deep crease had burrowed itself between his eyebrows. “Jin, you can live your life however you want, but give up on that woman.” A deep breath. “You’ll die.”

Jin held Yuuji high into the air, admiring how the rays of the sun that fell through the glass doors warmed the baby’s face. The motion woke the child up, and he blinked into the light with an almost confused-looking expression.

“Don’t talk about such things in front of Yuuji. They say babies remember more than we think,” he chided the other in a light tone. He really didn’t want to go over this topic again. Not at this time, preferably not ever.

His father was getting agitated again. “I know you wanted a child and that didn’t happen with Kaori. But Kaori died and-”

The tirade was interrupted as a dark figure approached. “Father, what are you talking about?” Her eyebrows were lifted in mock innocence.

“Don’t call me that,” the old man hissed. “You don’t have the right.”

Jin saw the train coming, and the look on Kaori’s face told him that she was going to make it crash. Well, it had to come out eventually. He resisted the urge to fumble with the ring underneath his sweater.

And surely enough... “Oh, but I do.” She was clearly savouring this moment. “It’s in the books and everything.” To top it off, she pulled the silver necklace out of her jeans pocket. Jin felt touched that she actually carried the ring with her, just wished she wouldn’t use it in this way.

“Don’t tell me...” His father whipped around, and fixated him with an intense glare. “You actually married her? Do you care that little about your life? About Kaori’s life?”

He really didn’t want to have this argument in front of Yuuji. One of his first memories shouldn’t be his family fighting. “You said I can live my life however I want,” he countered.

Kaori strolled closer, watching the light bounce off the smooth surface of the ring and the chain she was holding in her hand. “I can understand your reservations. I initially wasn’t convinced either, but Jin presented me with some enlightening arguments.” She beamed at the old man. “It really is frustratingly difficult for an unmarried couple to raise a child in Japan. And just think of the tax benefits we will get.”

Now his father actually looked hurt. He watched the ring sway in the air. “That’s your mother’s ring isn’t it?” Jin felt like he didn’t need to affirm that question, so he remained silent. “I bestowed it to you for Kaori, and now you threw it away for a marriage out of convenience, and gave it to her of all people.” A painful feeling was churning inside of him. The air suddenly felt a lot colder. “Okay. I give up. Be happy together or don’t. I don’t care.”

Looking like a broken man, Wasuke walked over to the bundle in Jin's arms. He lovingly stroked his palm over Yuuji's head. The boy still looked sleepy, but his eyes flickered to his grandfather for a moment. In a low voice the man said, "Don't delude yourself into thinking that you can have a family with that woman. I can only see this ending in misery, but it is your choice. Soon she will move on. What happens to you will depend on how useful you are to her. I hope you very much will be, but you're playing with fire here. Whatever happens, please... please just keep a close eye on Yuuji and don't leave her alone with him. He doesn't deserve to go through this. He doesn't deserve to have her as a mother."

He looked up and ran his hand through Jin's hair, just like he had done with his grandson. A weak humorless smile appeared on his lips for a split second before it was replaced by a frown again. One last clap on Jin's shoulder, and he made his way towards the exit and out of the hospital. Jin looked after him with mixed feelings. The finality of the action bore down on him. It was one thing to have a distanced relationship with his father, another to see him walk away from him with the clear intention to break all contact. Possibly forever.

He had nagged him and questioned him, but only because he cared. Now on the other hand... Jin suddenly felt very alone. Like a guiding hand on his back, that would catch him if he fell, had suddenly disappeared. The last words of his father mingled with all his confusing thoughts and emotions, creating a maelstrom inside of him that threatened to suck him under.

Warm arms closed around his waist from behind. It wasn't just a hug, it felt like he was being held together. A grounding force. Hot breath ghosted past his ear. "You will always have value to me. You are the father of my child after all."

The chaos inside of him died down. The turbulent thoughts cleared themselves. Feelings fell into place. He turned around in her arms, and laid his head on her shoulder. "Thank you. I feel the same way about you."

Looking down, he saw his son sleeping peacefully, embraced by the bodies of his parents. This wasn't so bad. He could live like this. He had Kaori, and he had Yuuji. That was all he really needed.

## Chapter End Notes

- Chengdu (also sometimes called "Gaydu" or China's "gay

capital") is one of if not the most LGBTQ+ friendly city in China. When homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997 and declassified as a mental illness in 2001, a lot of queer people especially from rural areas moved to Chengdu because of its greater acceptance of queer people overall, which is what Kenjaku is alluding to.

- The story Kenjaku tells Yuuji is the Torikaebaya Monogatari (off. engl. "The Changelings"), which was written in the late Heian era and is about two gnc/trans half-siblings that get raised as the gender that makes them fit better into society. afab -> man, amab -> woman. Most of the story is about their, especially the (trans) guy's, struggles to not get outed while climbing the ranks in the imperial court. The moral of the story ends up being that you can't be happy unless you accept the gender and societal roles forced on you, but up to those last chapters the story is quite interesting. In the Meiji period it was decried as perverse because it for example describes a man menstruating and later giving birth, but more recently it is seen as an important look at gender and sexuality in the Heian era. While the part Jin overhears describes the brother's first experiences of what I'll boldly call dysphoria, I thought it also fit well with Yuuji's situation.

- Lun Yu = Analects of Confucius; if you translate Kenjaku's words literally, it would be: 身を殺して仁を成す = kill the body/oneself and perform compassion

It's basically intended to mean to be compassionate at any cost, but even with that nicer wording I thought it fits with Yuuji's character arc and fate. And it just happens to include the word ji/jin (仁) too.

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all the nice comments I have gotten for this work! I'm sorry it took me so long to update. But this in return, here's another longer chapter (nobody complained about it in the last chapter, so I'm just gonna assume you don't mind...)

Disclaimer: there is emotional and physical child abuse in this chapter. It is probably not a surprise given Kenjaku's track record with kids but I still want to warn you. Nothing bloody, but there will be vomit and choking. The incident is discussed before and after it happens, so even if you skip the description of the actual abuse, you will know what happens.

Nonetheless, I hope you enjoy the read!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When arriving at the apartment, Jin's mood lifted significantly. Now Yuuji would finally get to see his real home. Despite how sleepy he was, the boy actually looked somewhat interested in the new environment. A lot of new visuals and smells must be swamping his senses. Though any joy he might have felt quickly waned after a few minutes, and his eyelids began to droop again. The excitement of the day had left not only the baby exhausted. By the evening, Jin felt like he could drop dead at any second.

He put Yuuji into his crib in their bedroom, and then broke down next to Kaori on the sofa with a hot cup of tea. Jin buried his head in the crook of her neck and enjoyed the peace her presence brought him, taking a sip from his hot beverage from time to time. After a while, he could feel fingers brush through his hair. This was nice. No hospital, no pregnancy to worry about, no stress about what his father might think of their relationship. Despite what he told himself, the last thought evoked a twinge inside him. He hugged Kaori tighter.

"Thank you for being with me," he mumbled.

She hummed, sending vibrations through his body. It took her a moment to answer, but eventually she said, "To be honest, I'm surprised how long this has lasted."

He frowned into her shirt. "What do you mean?"

Kaori twirled a strand of his hair around her finger. "I expected you to run at some point. Shortly after the resurrection, when you found out that I'm not Kaori, when you came to Tokyo, when the pregnancy didn't progress the way you had expected. There were many opportunities. Most people would be gone by now."

That was true. And he had definitely thought about it. Many times. But there had always been a reason for him to stay. For the sake of Kaori, for the sake of their child, because he didn't want to relive that dark night after Kaori's accident. He was glad he had stayed. As many troubles as it had brought along.

"It wasn't that bad," he reassured her. She snorted. "You might be a little peculiar, but I still like spending time with you. Besides, who would I be to abandon you, when you were obviously struggling during the pregnancy. I couldn't leave you alone in that state."

"How sweet." Kaori grabbed his mug and placed it on the living room table besides them. Then, she let herself fall back on the sofa and pulled him on top of her. Jin braced his hands beside her head to avoid putting his full weight on her. She reached up and cupped his face.

"What if I hadn't revived Kaori's body, and instead had shown up with the face of someone else? Some woman you had never met before. Would you have still agreed to my offer to have a child together?"

He blinked, surprised. "...I don't know." Thoughtful, he looked off to the side. He wouldn't just get together with a complete stranger, but in the end things might not have ended up so different. After all, he had started living with someone he initially knew nothing about. Without the extra attachment of Kaori's body it would have taken longer, but the outcome might have been the same. If he had known beforehand that their union would create Yuuji, it would have definitely swayed him towards her. "Maybe," he started slowly. She watched him pace out his thoughts with a curious look. "If I got to know you first and then you asked me...maybe."

She broke out into harsh laughter. "You seriously would be more attracted to me the more you got to know me?" His head was pulled down into a kiss. "You are so damaged."

Jin pouted. "I'm not damaged. Isn't it normal to prefer your partner being honest with you? I wouldn't want to be in a relationship with a facade."

A leg snaked around his waist and forced him flush against her. She ground her hips up into his, making a tingling feeling shoot from his crotch through his entire body. "You're right," she said while sneaking a hand underneath his shirt. "Perfectly understandable. I should definitely open up more." To emphasise her point, she spread his legs further with her knee, so he was properly straddling her lap.

Jin lightly trailed kisses along her jaw, while running a hand up her side. "I'm glad we are in agreement."

She opened his pants, and slid her fingers along his waistband. Anticipation sent goosebumps over his skin. As his touch wandered further up her body towards her chest, she froze up and clasped his wrist with her free hand.

"Don't touch me there." Her voice was unexpectedly cold.

Hastily, he pulled his hand back, and rightened himself a little. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you."

"You're not hurting me," she sighed. "Just avoid my chest. I don't like it." She moved his hand further down her body. "Everywhere else is fine." Her other hand grabbed his butt, feeling him up with fingers teasing between his cheeks, her movement making it clear to him that he should continue what he had been doing. Releasing a shaky breath, he shifted slightly to give her hand more room to explore.

"Okay," he whispered, pushing up the hem of her shirt a little to reveal the skin underneath. His fingers trailed soft circles around her navel before moving further down. He smiled. "Just tell me if there's anything else I should do differently."

Jin was lying in Kaori's arms, legs intertwined, welcoming her body heat as the sweat on his skin was slowly starting to cool down. The long-sleeve she was still wearing, was providing additional comfort. He was lazily brushing his fingers through her slightly wet hair, thoughts still in a haze, as a faraway whine interrupted their intimacy.

Kaori lifted her head and looked in the direction of the bedroom. "That took longer than expected. How nice of him to keep quiet until now."

He sighed and disentangled himself from her, eliciting a discontent grumble. While he was searching for his boxers, the whine evolved

into a cry. Kaori unearthed his underwear from a crack in the couch. Giving her a thankful smile, he jumped into them, and struggled on his t-shirt as he was walking towards the source of distress.

One change of diapers later, he tried to put Yuuji in his crib again, but the boy kept struggling, seemingly not wanting to be left alone. Giving up, he decided to take him with them into the bed instead. He put the baby into Kaori's arms and asked her to get him comfortable, while he made a stop at the bathroom to wash up. When he came back, Yuuji was resting between their pillows, already fast asleep with the rabbit plushie his grandfather had gifted him in his arms. Seeing the reminder of his father send a pang through his chest, but the sensation was fleeting and less intense than before. Kaori had changed into a different shirt, and was lying next to their son, head leaning on her hand, watching the child with an ambiguous look on her face.

Jin joined her and stroked Yuuji's head, smiling to himself. They made quite the odd family, but right now he wouldn't want it any other way.

In the early morning, Jin was woken by the infant's restlessness. Letting Kaori stay in bed a little longer, he lifted Yuuji into his arms, and left the room as quietly as possible. After preparing a new bottle of milk, he settled down on the sofa with the boy. Watching Yuuji drink eagerly, he smiled to himself. In the light of the morning, the anxiety induced by his last conversation with his father was only a distant shadow in the past. Enjoy the moment. Worrying wouldn't help Jin, and it wouldn't help Yuuji. Come what may, he would always have the memories of these peaceful moments. He just needed to make as many of them as possible.

When the child had finished, he put the bottle to the side, and let him rest and process his meal. As he looked down, he noticed the boy smiling up at him. The sight made his heart want to burst out of his chest. A sight so enchanting that he didn't even take note of Kaori joining him on the sofa.

"So he can make proper facial expressions now." Her voice ripped him out of his enchantment.

He beamed at her. Truth be told, he had been worried that the



confrontation yesterday might have had a negative effect on Yuuji, but he had apparently been too tired to pay attention. Taking in Kaori's form, he noticed a difference in clothing style. That dark grey sweater looked very familiar.

"Is that one of mine?" he asked.

She put an arm on the backrest of the sofa. "Yes, I couldn't find anything better."

He reached out and tugged the slightly too wide cut into place, so it fell evenly over her shoulders. "It suits you. You're welcome to see my wardrobe as yours." The whole thing actually felt quite romantic to him. This way he would literally always be close to her.

She returned his smile. "Great. I'll take you up on that then."

Shifting her attention to Yuuji, she studied him for a moment before flicking her finger over the soles of his feet. His legs twitched, came close to kicking. She did it again and Yuuji released a watery giggle.

"His reflexes and movements are pretty sharp already. In a few weeks he should be able to properly move his limbs. Maybe even start to crawl a little. Although I expect not very far," she theorised.

Jin chuckled. "You know you can just play with him, right? You don't have to pretend to conduct a medical examination to engage with him."

Kaori gave him a long look. "I'm not pretending. If playing with him was what I wanted to do, I would do it."

"Of course." He assured her. Gathering up the child, he urged him into his mother's arms. "I think you two should bond some more."

She huffed, but accepted her son. Yuuji smiled up at her, and moved his arms as if trying to catch her hair. Kaori caught one of his hands and wiggled it in front of his face. "Is this what you want me to do? Am I showing enough motherly affection?"

Jin crossed his arms, judging the two with fake seriousness. "Not bad. Now just put a little more heart into it. Talk to him and not me."

Tutting at his antics, she gave the boy an exasperated look. "Did you know that your father is a pain in the ass? And not in a good way. Usually, I'm the-

He jumped forward and slapped his hand over her mouth. "Language!" His face burned red. "You are teaching him all the wrong vocabulary."

Her tongue teased itself between his fingers, making him retract his hand a little. She snickered. "He will eventually learn it anyway. And I thought I was supposed to talk to him. What's wrong with telling him more about his father?" A sly smile spread over her lips as she continued to lick along his fingers.

He pulled back, still a little bashful, and lightly shoved her shoulder, wiping his hand on the sweater in the process. "There are some things he doesn't need to know."

"Well, I think-," she suddenly looked down to the baby, "He's holding my finger." She spread the digits that held the tiny arm, showing Jin that Yuuji was indeed tightly clasping her thumb. Even after a bit of wiggling and pulling, he wouldn't let go.

Both parents looked at their son with pride. Jin leaned down, and stroked the child's head. "So young and already so strong. You really are our special boy."

Kaori hummed, and subtly moved Yuuji's fingers to form a proper fist around her. "Maybe I should talk more often to him. My words seem to have an encouraging effect."

"I'm glad you came to that conclusion." He tried to glare at her, but struggled to keep up a scolding expression. "Just keep it age-appropriate."

She gave a defeated sigh.

Jin's workplace had granted him a month of paternal leave. It wasn't as much as he had hoped, but enough to witness Yuuji's first milestones. With every day and every week that passed, he developed further, became more energetic, more aware. Kaori in turn started to express more care towards him. He still got the impression that she was more training than genuinely playing with him, but it made his son happy and it was nice to see her being so involved, so he figured it didn't really matter how much emotional sensitivity she was

displaying. She would spend hours on the couch or living room floor, showing picture books to Yuuji, explaining the drawings to him, talking about concepts that far surpassed the child's limited understanding, and patiently tried to get him to interact with his surroundings.

After one week, Yuuji lifted his head for the first time. Jin had been lying with him on the sofa, the boy resting on his belly, when Kaori came up from behind and loudly slammed the Japanese-English dictionary in her hands shut. Father and son startled. Before he could complain about having only barely avoided a heart attack, she smugly pointed towards their son, who was craning his head and looking at her with big eyes.

After two weeks, Jin didn't need to support the head anymore when holding him, and after three, Yuuji was able to push himself up on his arms and clumsily pull himself towards something he wanted when they were playing on the floor.

"He has become more talkative hasn't he?" Jin mused.

All three of them were sitting on a patchwork blanket. Yuuji was lying on his stomach, and excitedly waiting for his father to roll the padded ball over to him again. Kaori was sitting off to the side, busying herself by building a fortress out of wooden blocks.

"If you want to call those slurred sounds he's making 'talk', then yes," she replied, and put another brick on the carefully balanced construction that was supposed to become a tower.

"Don't be so harsh on him," he chided, "he is making amazing progress. Really unlike anything you would expect to see from a baby his age." He gently rolled the ball back to the boy. Yuuji lifted his arm and dropped it against the toy. It was uncoordinated, but had enough force to make it shoot against Jin's knee. "Wow, that had a lot of power," he laughed. Kaori quietly chuckled as well.

Jin picked the ball up again and held it in front of his son's face. "This is a ball. Can you say 'ball'?" He wiggled the object for emphasis. "Ball."

"Aah," came the unsteady reply.

Not quite right, but Jin didn't let himself get discouraged. "That was good! What about 'Papa'." He pointed to himself. "Papa."

Yuuji blinked a few times, before replying, “Aa-gah.” A concentrated look contorted his face, and he gave it another try. “Aa- abah...ba.”

Jin lifted him up into his arms. “Hey, that was close! You’re doing great.”

“Ba,” came the answer again, this time with more vigour.

Turning him around, he pointed towards Kaori. “That is your Mama. Ma-ma.”

She looked over to them, and gave Yuuji a judgemental smile. “Aa-ma,” he greeted her.

“See?” Jin exclaimed with excitement. “He is getting the hang of it.”

The boy wiggled his arms. “Ma!”

“Yes, Ba and Ma.” He laid Yuuji in his lap, and gave him the ball to play with.

Kaori let out a chuckle, and haughtily told her child, “Not bad, but in the future I expect to be called *hahaue* .” Her tone didn’t give away how serious she was about that statement.

“You are really showing your age there,” Jin teased.

“What, would *otaa-sama* be better?” she retorted.

“Please no, that’s worse.” He watched her for a moment after she turned back to her block building. “Did you call your mother *hahaue* ?”

If the question bothered her, she didn’t show it. Another wall of bricks was raised next to the wooden tower. “Probably,” was all she said.

“You don’t know?” he tentatively prodded further.

She threw him a glance. “Do you remember what you called your mother?”

His mood sank a little. “I don’t,” he admitted quietly. “But I assume it was ‘Mama’. It feels right.” Silence stretched between them. Kaori continued her construction work. “The only memories I have of her are very vague. Like the colour of her hair or smells I associate with her, but nothing concrete.” Another pause. “What do you remember of your parents?”

“Nothing.” Came the simple answer.

His eyebrows shot up. “Nothing at all?”

It seemed inconceivable to him to just have emptiness where your family was supposed to be. Pity welled up inside him as he imagined such a life. It must be terribly lonely to not have any memory of your origins and the people that loved you unconditionally since birth.

Kaori turned her attention to him. “I have been alive for a very long time.” She tapped her temple. “Even my brain can’t memorise everything I have experienced. It has to forget irrelevant things to make room for the new information I pick up every day.” Seeing his expression, she released a tired sigh. “Don’t give me that look.”

He couldn’t help it. That just sounded like a very bleak existence. If a long life came at the expense of forgetting your childhood, your family, it didn’t seem worthwhile to him. These things weren’t irrelevant. They were the core of your being. His gaze wandered down to Yuuji, who was currently trying to put the ball into his mouth.

With a determined look he said, “It is good that you have us then. We will make a new family for you to remember. New memories that you can’t so easily forget.”

She leaned back, as if physically trying to avoid his proposition. “Well, at the moment I don’t have the luxury to forget you anyway.”

He gave her a soft smile. Kaori looked away and released a huff. Crawling over to him, she took the ball away from Yuuji, and lifted him out of Jin’s lap into her arms.

“Ma!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, Ma,” she affirmed with a crooked smile.

Bringing him over to where she had sat before, Kaori held her son before the fortress she had built with great care for the past half hour. His legs and arms dangled freely in the air.

“Now Yuuji, what do you think of this?” The child stretched out an arm and grabbed at the top of the tower. A few wooden blocks cluttered to the floor. “Good start,” she encouraged, holding him a little closer. “Try again.” Yuuji struck the building a little further down, causing more blocks to fall. Kaori took his arm and guided him through the motions. Supported by her hand, the boy brought down

wall upon wall of bricks. A giggle escaped him every time a low rumble was caused by the scattering blocks.

When only a few rows were left, she lowered him to the ground and let him bring those down on his own, now more efficiently than before. Like a miniature Godzilla, Yuuji fell forward and destroyed the remainder of the carefully built fortress. Lying between rubble, he cheerfully grabbed at the blocks. For a moment, Jin worried that the wooden edges might hurt him, but it seemed that the boy had miraculously avoided coming into contact with them. No sign of injury to be seen.

Kaori helped him up again, and sat him opposite of her, back turned to the destruction they had caused. "Great, you brought it all down," she praised. "That was fun, wasn't it?" Yuuji put his fingers in his mouth and smiled at her.

One evening a few days later, Jin was lying in bed with Kaori, Yuuji situated between them. They had agreed that he would sleep with them for the next few months, until he felt more comfortable being alone during the night. His mother was telling him another one of her stories to help him fall asleep. This one being one of the more uplifting ones. Supporting her head with her hand, she talked down to the boy in an even tone.

*Perhaps it was the result of Saisho's wishes that at the beginning of the seventh month, a beautiful boy was born. Saisho's joy far surpassed the usual for such occasions. It was touching the way he himself put to sleep and cared for both mother and child. Not for an instant did he take his eyes off of them. For the time being he did nothing but devote himself to caring for the child, not leaving him for even a moment. 'This is the destiny of two people who loved each other deeply in a previous life. How wonderful it would have been if you had become a woman long ago; we might have lived like this without any cares all that time,' he said, bringing to the mother this child whose radiance and beauty shone forth more each day.*

*More than ten days had passed since the delivery, and Saisho thought with relief that things would probably go on that way. Observing that Chunagon seemed distraught, Saisho had not been wholly confident that Chunagon might not resume his masculine guise, but when he saw how much he*

*seemed to love the baby, constantly embracing and caring for him, Saisho began to be convinced that Chunagon would never forsake his child.*

Jin listened intently, letting the words run through his head, and involuntarily comparing it to his own life. A recent father, overjoyed after the birth of his son, but still having doubts about the mother's state of mind. Saisho seemed to want to form Chunagon into something he wasn't or prevent him from changing and potentially leaving him. Was that how she felt? Was she trying to tell him that he was comparing her too much to Kaori? Did she see him as being too focused on the past?

He was putting an unfair expectation on her, he presumed. Although honestly, he was gradually stopping to thinking of her as the Kaori he once knew. Especially after Yuuji had been born. Maybe because this was a new experience unique to the two of them. It might be that he wasn't communicating that perspective well enough. Not listening to Kaori's needs. As he considered the mother from the story, Chunagon, and his similarities with Kaori, another thought struck him.

When Yuuji had fallen asleep, he looked over to his partner. He hadn't seen Kaori without a shirt since Yuuji's birth. Kaori wearing his t-shirts or sweaters was now a welcome normality. Then there was the discomfort with him touching anything near the chest area. Jin distantly remembered a discussion they had had in the past.

"That story of yours made me think," he started. Kaori looked over to him, face passive. "Do you," he tried to think of the right words, not wanting to hurt any feelings, "Are you like Chunagon? Do you feel like a man?"

Kaori didn't seem troubled by his phrasing. "So that's what's been eating at you all this time. I'm surprised Yuuji was able to fall asleep with the creaking of those wheels in your head in the background." A soft playful smile. "No, currently I'm not a man. Nor a woman."

"I see," Jin replied. Nervously searching for more answers in Kaori's eyes, he continued, "I know you don't like me touching you in certain ways. Should I also speak of you with different pronouns?" He hesitated. "Or use a different name?"

The other raised an eyebrow. "I don't really care how people address me. Do whatever you want. I have had so many names in the past, it really doesn't make a difference to me if you call me Kaori, Noritoshi, Harue or whatever else."

He mulled it over. Not getting any concrete statements was a little maddening, he didn't want to accidentally upset them, but if that was how they preferred it, he would accept it. "So, it's alright if I keep calling you Kaori?"

They shrugged. "If that's what makes you happy."

"Okay," he said without much conviction. "So you are also still my wife and Yuuji's mother?"

Kaori reached over and laid a hand behind his neck. "Jin. It was simply an old story, don't overthink it. You are making this more dramatic than it needs to be. Just do what you normally do, and if I have a problem with it, I will tell you." They looked over to their son. "But Yuuji better address me as *hahaue* when he's older."

Jin chuckled. He reached up, and clasped their hand. This wasn't really something he ever had to deal with before, but he would figure it out. Really, there wasn't much difference to what had happened up until now. He had accepted the change in clothes and adjustments during sex in stride, so he shouldn't puzzle over this either. They would figure out the rest along the way.

One month of parental leave passed quickly, and soon the care for Yuuji had to be divided between them. Kenjaku would take the morning till evening, whereas Jin would take over after he came home from work and on the weekends.

In the beginning, Jin was stressing quite a lot over letting them all alone with the child, reminding them hourly of meal and sleeping times, how to best take care of the infant and what to avoid, as if Kenjaku hadn't spent the last month watching him do the dirty work. Not to mention that they had multiple lifetimes worth of experience with children. Usually those experiences hadn't been very pleasant for the other party, but they knew how to keep an infant quiet if needed. While they preferred to avoid something like diaper changes, they could do it if necessary. After weeks of practice, they were able to perform the task quite fast and efficiently.



Kenjaku was lying spread out across their bed, important documents scattered around them. No one else was home, allowing them to review the latest report they had been sent in peace. The search for the Prison Realm would likely take them a little longer than anticipated. Another blank. They had discovered a cursed object, but not the one they had been looking for. At least they knew the general area of where the object must be. That area included multiple countries but still, even narrowing it down to one continent was a success when 500 years ago, they had no idea where in the world the Prison Realm might be.

After years of research they were able to say that their target was hiding in the mountain regions of Eastern Europe, likely the Carpathians or Sudetes. It wasn't in Romania, so their next destination was Slovakia. The report was bordering on optimistic that this was where they would find it, but Kenjaku wasn't getting their hopes up just yet. The tales about an object that was housing great evils, and therefore can't and should never be opened was vague but a lead nonetheless.

A tiny hand slapped them in the face. Kenjaku pried it gently but emphatically away.

Thanks to the existence of Zenin Toji, there wasn't as strict of a time limit on their search. Even with the Star Plasma Vessel being born and the need for a merge fast approaching, as long as the Zenin outcast existed, there was no need to stress. Yet. His girlfriend was dead and Kong was in the midst of dusting up his child caring abilities. No strings held the young man back. The foundation of morality gone, his mental health was spiralling. Zenin's monetary problems were now the things egging him on. Everything was set, they just needed to wait for Tengen to call for the merger and the spectacle could unfold.

That left them with enough freedom for some more exploring. It might be best to go to Slovakia in person. Their people were of course competent, but they could never shake the feeling that they might have overlooked something, misunderstood someone, fallen for a lie. The closer they got to their objective, the more Kenjaku itched to take things into their own hands. Their time here was drawing to an end anyway. After more than a year of primarily being in Sendai, a change of scenery didn't sound so bad. Besides, they had never been to Slovakia before. Even if the Prison Realm didn't turn out to be there, it couldn't hurt to make connections and acquire new contacts. Especially now, as the country seemed set on wanting to join NATO and the EU.

Hands were grabbing at them again, pulling their shirt, trying to find hold to drag themselves further. A knee burrowed itself into their arm. With a sigh, they looked to the side. Yuuji was doing his best to climb on his mother's chest.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" Kenjaku asked, genuine curiosity mixing into their voice.

The boy answered with an excited babble. He reached forward, and flopped squarely across their neck. Recognizing that he wouldn't leave them alone for the foreseeable future, they put the pages of the report away, and lifted Yuuji into the air.

"Such a needy child. What am I supposed to do with you, huh?"

More nonsensical sounds came as a reply, accentuated by him wiggling his arms and legs.

Kenjaku leaned their head to the side, studying his reaction. "You like that?"

They shifted their hold, so the flat of their palm was spread over his torso. His limbs were hanging down, but he was still able to hold up his head. Bending their arm a little, they threw their child a few centimetres into the air, before catching him again. He giggled. They did it again, this time a little higher. Yuuji stretched out his arms as if trying to fly on his own. Once more, he was safely caught.

Nothing hinted at him being scared. The thought that his mother might not catch him, and he would fall to his death - or at least days of pain and a broken bone - never even seemed to cross his mind. There was a natural trust that his parents wouldn't hurt him. Kenjaku lowered him until he was hovering above their face. The infant clumsily reached out to them. Before he could make contact, they flung him up again, high enough that he was almost touching the ceiling.

Yuuji was squeaking with joy. They sat up, and watched their son soar into the air before gravity caught up and forced him to descend towards the bed. The child fell and fell, completely oblivious. Kenjaku studied his expression dispassionately. Nearing the sheets, a primal part of his brain realised that he was about to collide with something solid, and that this might be painful, too much for his young body to handle. The experience of pain was inevitable and nothing could prevent it, nobody would help him. That realisation was what they had been waiting for. Lightning fast, Kenjaku reached out and

snatched the infant out of the air, extra supporting his head so his malleable vertebra wouldn't break from the sudden shift in movement.

Cradling him in their arms, they smiled down at him. "Did you think I would let you fall? Were you scared?" He stared back with wide eyes, lips wobbling. They brushed his head soothingly. "Interesting how you haven't experienced pain or suffering, much less death, but you can still fear. A very old survival mechanism in our brain." They nodded to themselves. "But don't worry, I wouldn't let anything happen to you. Three months and twenty-one days is still too young. Your body hasn't developed enough yet. You can't even stand up. And can you imagine how upset your father would be if you got hurt?"

Yuuji started to snifle and whimper. A garbled version of 'Mama' tumbled out of his trembling lips.

Kenjaku brought him closer, and let him sling his arms around their neck. "There there, nothing happened." They patted his back in slow, even strokes. "You will have to get used to this feeling. There are a lot of things in the world to be scared of, and I will not always be there to catch you. Or be generous enough to do it. One day you need to control your emotions and face your fears. That is what makes a strong character. And a strong vessel."

They pried the boy away from them, and wiped away the tears that had formed at the edges of his eyes. "What do you say we go out for a bit. There are a few things I need to take care of."

Kenjaku ruffled his hair, and poked his nose. That made Yuuji brighten up some more. He reached up, and grasped their hand, pulling it into a tight embrace. His grip would have been bruising for a non-sorcerer. It was too early for more drastic measures, but little challenges like this could go a long way in furthering his growth. They grinned, and tickled him, until he broke out into a laugh.

The infant was hoisted on their shoulders. It was the most convenient way of transporting him. Both their hands were free, they didn't have to carry anything, and nothing was clinging to their chest or back like a leech - the way Jin preferred to do things. Another advantage was that it engaged Yuuji, forcing him to actively participate unless he wanted to repeat the experience from earlier.

"Hold tight. You can put your hands under my chin," they moved his arms to their neck, while holding him upright with one hand, "or up

here.” The arms were placed over their forehead. “Just stay away from my eyes, and try not to pull my hair or crush my windpipe.”

Yuuji’s hands padded their way down to their jaw again. They could feel him leaning forward. His little heart fluttered against the back of their skull, creating a distant thrumming in their ears. Carefully, they removed their hand from his back. He stayed on their shoulders, didn’t even waver. A small smile spread over their lips. Slowly, they started to walk out of the door and down the stairwell, giving Yuuji time to adjust to his new swaying ride.

Their first destination was the library they liked to frequent and that had become somewhat of a base of operation for them here in Sendai. It wasn’t the closest one to Jin’s apartment but it had a fast and stable internet connection, and the staff there didn’t mind if they brought their laptop with them. A buzzing internet cafe might’ve provided more anonymity, but the chances of a unwanted eyes over their shoulder were higher. Their visits to the library were more noticable, but visitors were technically only supposed to use the computers the facility provided and not bring any personal devices, meaning nobody expected Kenjaku with their laptop huddled in a corner, checking emails and doing research.

They had managed to convince the head librarian, a depressingly repressed woman trapped in an unhappy marriage, to make an exception for them, provided that they didn’t bother anyone else, and didn’t use the internet connection to look at porn. Nothing too difficult to adhere to.

Both the library and the desperate woman proved to be a worthwhile investment once more when half an hour later, they held a language guide for Slovak in their hands. It even had a cassette with practice dialogues. They could only borrow it for two months, but that was plenty of time to get a basic grasp of the language. For a deeper understanding they had the documents and audio files their contacts would send them.

Technically, they would learn the language anyway when taking over one of the locals, but Kenjaku preferred to have at least a general knowledge of the language beforehand. For one, the learning process was just a good exercise but more importantly, they didn’t want their speech influenced by their host’s speaking pattern. It could be useful when trying to pass, but they still wanted to be able to express themselves in a way that represented them.

The learning material heavy in their bag and Yuuji safely on their shoulders, they left the building again to proceed to their next destination. They sent Uraume a short SMS, while making their way through the busy streets down to Hirose River. Finding a nice spot, Kenjaku sat down in the green grass of the river banks and waited. The infant happily rolled around in the dirt next to them.

It was a nice summer day, not too warm with a light breeze coming from the water. Dragonflies were buzzing through the air. From their elevated position they had a good view over the water and the promenade next to it. A group of school children playfully shoved each other around. Some businessmen enjoyed their late lunch break, sitting together on a bench and making polite conversation. Two women were involved in a heated discussion. If one ignored the concrete and glass buildings around them, not much had changed compared to say 200 years ago. The same relaxed and peaceful atmosphere.

Kenjaku quietly watched the people around them, at times reaching over to pluck leaves the boy was adamant on eating out of Yuuji's mouth. Eventually, light steps and the rustle of robes broke the tranquillity, alerting them to a visitor. Uraume sat down to their right, their son as a buffer between them. Their body oozed tension. Hard lines sharpened their face and the arms hidden in their sleeves were more rigid than usual.

“Good to see you again. How have you been?” They welcomed the other with a warm smile.

That warmth was lost on Uraume's frosty demeanour. “You know fully well how I feel.” Their right hand produced a tea caddy out of their sleeve. “I got the bark.” With slight hesitation they handed the tin over.

Kenjaku opened the lid and inspected the green flaky contents. It was more than enough. Definitely could be used another time in the future. “Thanks. This must have been hard for you.”

Uraume simply pressed their lips together, not looking at them, before replying, “It is not easy to come by these days.” That wasn't what they had been referring to, but they let it go for now. They didn't want to antagonise them too much.

Closing the can again, they hid the tea away in their bag. Technically, this concluded their meeting, but Uraume was clearly not done.

Kenjaku let their gaze stray towards the water, glancing over to their companion from time to time to confirm how far along they were in mulling over their thoughts.

The younger curse user reached over to Sukuna's future vessel and contemplatively ran their fingers through his light hair. Yuuji curiously looked up to them, meeting the red eyes studying him, and then reached out and clasped a finger. Uraume's lips twitched momentarily before schooling themselves back into neutrality. They pulled their hand back, but the infant wouldn't let go. After a few failed attempts, they relented with a sigh.

"Are you sure that it will work?" they said in a low voice, eyes not leaving the vessel. "That he will survive it?"

Of course this was what was bothering them. "Yes. I would say the rate of success is about 96%."

Apparently that wasn't enough for Sukuna's trusted companion. "Does it have to be now? Why not wait a year or two. Let his strength develop a bit more."

Kenjaku turned further around to them, and leaned their head on their hand, observing the hints of repressed emotion that flickered over the other's face. The topic must have awoken some unwelcome memories of Sukuna's demise. As marvellous as the end result was in terms of jujutsu, watching the process of self-mummification wasn't pretty. Uraume had witnessed first hand how their master had wasted away, surely tormented by doubts about the process and their end goal, unsure if it was all worth it or if Sukuna would just crumble to dust. Kenjaku hadn't been all that worried, trusting in their creation and even back then generally not too familiar with emotional agony, but Uraume was different. It was clear they weren't keen on reliving those moments. And as far as Kenjaku was concerned, they wouldn't need to.

"The older he gets, the more likely he is to remember it, which could influence his willingness later on to eat Sukuna's fingers. Aside from that, I don't want to hang around in this body for another year. If he fails, it is far less bothersome to start over with Jin now, than go through the trouble of finding another suitable body later."

Uraume made a noise that indicated that they understood, but weren't happy about it. They looked up, meeting Kenjaku's eyes. "Then at least let me be there as well."

Now that was a problem. Should the test fail or even if Uraume thought it wasn't developing to their liking, that could put them in danger. The vow of creating Sukuna's vessel was fulfilled, so the other might decide, emotionally charged as they were, that they were better off on their own, without Kenjaku's help. In their current state there wasn't much they could do if Uraume decided to kill them. They would of course manage to escape, but it would needlessly complicate things.

Kenjaku moulded their expression into one of understanding but not sympathy or empathy - better not lay it on too thick, the monk knew them well after all. "I know you were by Sukuna's side until the end, so I can understand why you want to be there now, but it's unnecessary. This isn't comparable to actual *sokushinbutsu*. I won't use much of the tea, and it will be further diluted by food to emulate the effect Sukuna's fingers might have. It will be messy, but I don't expect too many complications. This is far less risky than Sukuna's ritual." Uraume thoughtfully looked down at the child in question. "And your visit might make Jin suspicious. The child will need some time to recover. I can't hide something as serious as a fever from him. While usually I could just chalk it up to a cold, with you being there even he will start to ask questions. He already dislikes you."

That seemed to sound reasonable to them. "That man is so troublesome. You should get rid of him already."

They smiled. "All in due time." After a pause they continued, "I will immediately inform you when the experiment was a success. Until then, just be patient and trust in my years of experience." Humour crinkled their eyes.

Uraume only gave them a dubious look in return. "Seems like I don't have much of a choice," they grumbled. Kenjaku flashed them a bright smile.

Wailing and gargling interrupted their back-and-forth. Yuuji was thrashing around on the ground, his fingers in his mouth. His mother sighed and pulled the struggling infant into their lap.

"What's the matter, hm? I told you, you shouldn't eat dirt." A trait they generally welcomed, but it could get exhausting when Yuuji accidentally swallowed the wrong thing or hurt himself on little stones.

They pried open his mouth with their thumb and took a look inside. There was a wet black dot on his tongue. It wiggled. Kenjaku swept

the drowning beetle up on their index finger and flicked it aside, back into the grass.

“Really, all this because of a bug?” They gave their son a disappointed look. “Eventually, you will have to eat much worse. Better get used to it.”

Uraume let out an amused huff from the side. “Looks like he’s hungry.” One of their hands disappeared in their sleeve. “Maybe he will like this more.”

A glass jar filled with a milky pink substance came to light. Kenjaku took it from their hand and turned it curiously around. It was hard to tell what it was, although knowing Uraume it wasn’t hard to guess what type of ingredients had been used. They screwed off the lid and took a tentative sniff. The smell was unassuming. Sweet and savoury.

Kenjaku dipped the tip of their index finger into the creamy content. It was dripping a little but otherwise about as solid as *koshian*. They stuck their finger into their mouth and thoughtfully picked apart the tastes that assaulted their tongue. There were definitely some fruits and vegetables in there, next to grain and the expected less vegetarian contents. Carrot, banana, apple, sweet potato, oatmeal, something that might be liver... their eyes widened at the familiar salty flavour of cerebrospinal fluid.

“It tastes good.” They gave their feedback with a lascivious grin. Well, it was a given that anything Uraume prepared would be tasty but they couldn’t imagine that the other had much experience with baby food. There must’ve been a lot of research and testing involved just for this little jar alone. Not that Uraume would ever admit to caring that much.

“Of course it does,” came the expected retort, “so keep your fingers away from it.” A plastic bag containing a spoon was thrown at them. Kenjaku caught it with their free hand and took out the utensil.

“I have a few more variations,” Uraume explained further. “I will bring them over in the coming days, you just have to tell me which he prefers and- stop eating!”

Kenjaku pulled the spoon out of their mouth. “You never cook for me anymore,” they gave them a hurt expression. “I have to take what I can get.”

“Well, you don’t need it,” they huffed, “He does. So feed your child.



Otherwise he will never make it through the trial.” Uraume’s face darkened for a moment. Kenjaku pulled Yuuji into a sitting position and prepared another spoon with the paste. “Besides, can’t your husband cook for you? What else is he good for,” they grumbled.

Watching Yuuji eagerly take the first nibble of food, they let out a deep sigh. “He always has to work late, meaning he only has time on the weekend. And his cooking isn’t all that exceptional. I’m becoming just another lonely housewife.”

Uraume gave them a slightly disgusted look. “Somehow I doubt that. And you are the one who chose to stay this long. It’s really your own fault.”

Kenjaku hummed. Yuuji had downed a few spoonfuls and was now sucking off the residuals. “I think he likes the new food. If there are any complications, I will contact you.” They put the utensil and closed glass jar into the plastic bag and tied-up the end. Turning back to their companion, they continued, “It would be best if you bring me anything else you have by Sunday. I will go scouting next week.”

The other’s brows lifted slightly. “Sure. Looking for a new body?”

A thoughtful nod. “There are some candidates but I haven’t really looked deeper into them. Purely appearance and occupation based so far.”

Uraume chuckled. “How vain. I’ll try to come by before Friday.”

After they said their goodbyes, Kenjaku gathered up their child and bag, and the two went their separate ways again. The food had made Yuuji sleepy but he still managed to cling onto them. On the way home, they made a last stop at a convenience store to get cold tea, chicken salad and some curry. Remembering that Jin had lamented this morning that his wristwatch wasn’t working anymore, they picked up a pack of batteries as well.

Carrying an infant around on their shoulders got them a few odd looks. An old woman came up to them when they were browsing the instant food aisle and asked if it wasn’t a bit dangerous to have their child sit so high up. They could feel Yuuji’s cheek on the top of their head, making them assume that he was resting but his arms were still tightly clasped around the upper part of their neck. With a polite smile they assured the woman that their child was fine and there was really no need to worry. She didn’t seem convinced but didn’t want to make a scene.

As they were joining the queue by the checkout counter, their eyes fell on a display of soap bubble bottles. Getting a somewhat whimsical idea, they decided to take one with them. Children best learn through play after all.

It had been about four months now. Four months since his grandson was born, and four months since he had completely broken contact with his son. He told himself it was better this way. Jin was an adult and could make his own decisions. If he wanted to throw away the life he used to have, that was in his right. He said he was ready to bear the consequences of his actions, and Wasuke was going to respect that.

Despite telling himself that he didn't care anymore after Jin's betrayal, he found that it was difficult to shake his old habits. While he made sure to not check up on his son anymore, at times Wasuke still caught himself scanning the newspaper for reports of unusual incidents in Jin's living area. His heart jumped every time the doorbell or his telephone rang. His gaze lingered a little too long on the framed photos of their Sapporo holiday. He just couldn't bring himself to put one of the last mementos of all three of them together away.

Another thought that bothered him and that he felt less guilty about not ignoring, was his grandson. Distancing himself from his son also meant that he didn't have any updates on the life and wellbeing of the youngest member of his family. Had Jin listened to his warnings? Had the imposter done something to him? Should Wasuke maybe just go and get the baby out of there? There were days when he actually took the metro, fully set on confronting his son and his son's new partner and taking the child from them, but the destined stop came and went and Wasuke hadn't gotten off.

It was better this way, he told himself. If there was one thing he was confident in, it was Jin's ability to care for children. He was a natural father, full of love, and he didn't want to take that from him now that he had sacrificed so much. Also, what was he going to do with the boy? He couldn't take care of a toddler. There was his part-time job and besides that, it had been decades since he last interacted with such a young kid. What did they even eat? Was he already eating? No, for now Jin would be the better parent. He just had to trust that he

would keep the little boy as far away from his supposed mother as possible.

So when one morning Wasuke heard a knock on the door, his heart jumped for a second. The knock was firm and confident, the person clearly wanted to be heard. Dread crept up on him but he decidedly ignored it. Probably just a door-to-door salesman. For a moment he considered not opening. He didn't feel like hearing about some new revolutionary rice cooker or the current hot mayoral candidate. But he had to satiate his conscience. He opened the door.

"Hi." That hated smile greeted him.

It was her. With his grandson in her arms and a bag of supplies standing by her feet. Wasuke begged any god that might be listening right now, that he was just dreaming. His stressed mind was playing tricks and he would wake up in his bed again. Unfortunately, the chances for that were low. The ground seemed to tilt. He had to grab the door frame for support.

"Where is Jin?" he croaked out, not sure if he even wanted to hear the answer.

"At work," came the carefree reply. "And I will be too, so I need you to watch Yuuji for the day." She slightly shifted the boy in her arms. He was seated in the crook of her elbow and currently burrowing his face in a dark blue oversized sweater that the man could swear actually belonged to Jin.

Blinking the dots that were dancing through his vision away and trying to concentrate on the words, he asked dumbfounded, "What?"

The woman cocked her head, studying him amused. "I will be out of town for the day and I can't take the kid with me, which means you as the grandfather have to step up."

Slowly, the meaning of the statement settled in. "So that means Jin is alright?"

She chuckled. "As alright as you can be with a nine-to-five job. Now, I would love to catch up but I have a bit of a tight schedule. Just take the child and I will be out of your hair."

Wasuke stared blankly at Yuuji. The boy looked a bit tired and seemed shy but that was to be expected. If he was clinging to her like this, that probably meant that nothing bad had happened to him yet and

Jin had kept him close by his side. Then again, he had no idea how to pick up signs of trauma in babies.

“Okay, I can watch over him today,” he said. It wasn’t like he had any plans anyway, and if it meant the child stayed away from her, all the better.

Stiffly, he leaned forward and grabbed the bag of supplies from the floor. The first thing that caught his eye was the plush bunny he had given Yuuji for his birthday. Seeing that they had actually kept it was touching, and lifted his mood a little. Aside from that, there were two small glass jars filled with some sort of baby food, a baby bottle, a pack of diapers, and an unmarked plastic container with a sticky note attached to it. He ripped off the note to get a closer look. Probably instructions but it was hard to read. The handwriting wasn’t familiar to him.

Putting together the pieces, he looked back to the woman that was still standing outside his doorstep. “Did you write this?”

“Yes, it’s important to prepare the formula properly or it can’t take its full effect,” she explained evenly. “Give him the baby food in about an hour and then again in the evening. I recommend six o’clock. It doesn’t matter which one you give first, just switch it up for variety of nutrients. Usually, he eats around three tablespoons each time but he’ll tell you when he’s had enough. I already gave him one bottle before we came here, so he will only need two more over the day. Three if he’s really hungry.” He stared at her blankly. “All clear?”

“Ah...yeah. Sure.” It was like he was thrown 32 years back in time. Studying the note a little more intently, he could make out that there were temperatures written on it but it was hard to tell if that nine wasn’t actually a seven or maybe a four. And then there were the words in between. “I can’t read this.” He held up the instructions.

She raised an eyebrow. “Really? Jin can read my handwriting. Most of the time.”

Wasuke gritted his teeth. “Good for him. I can’t.” A thought crossed his mind and he smirked. “You know, they say a person’s handwriting reflects their soul. A beautiful soul will produce beautiful *kanji*. An ugly one...” He gave a meaningful look to the chicken scratch on the paper.

The closer he inspected it, the more fitting it seemed. All jagged and crooked, strokes blending into each other. Not because of a weak or

shaking hand, on the contrary, it was precise and seemed almost clinical. Like she was cutting open the paper with a pen and leaving behind scars even more warped than the ones on her forehead.

Seemingly contemplating what he said, she hummed. “I think we have differing definitions of what a soul is but I do agree that it can reflect a person’s nature.” She smiled. “Some people are easier to read than others.” That was one way of looking at it. “As fascinating as this talk is, I have to go. Since you insist on being difficult, grab pen and paper and I’ll just dictate the instructions to you.”

He loathed being ordered around but he genuinely couldn’t read the note and it was important for Yuuji. The faster she left, the better. Sucking up his pettiness, he did as he was told and wrote down the guide for the baby formula. The preparation wasn’t all that difficult, most of it concerned what happened if the milk got cold.

When everything had been explained and written down, Wasuke got closer to her and stretched out his arms to take his grandson. She shifted her grip to accommodate him but was held back by the small fists buried tightly in her borrowed sweater. Yuuji let out a whine. His caretaker sighed, and used her free hand to turn his face so he was directly looking into her eyes.

“Listen, this is your grandfather. You already met him once,” she explained evenly. “There is no reason to fear him, you will be safer with him than you are with me. This is a new challenge for you but I am sure you are brave enough to do it. Now let go of me and your grandfather will take care of you.”

The man was sure the baby hadn’t understood anything she just said but the tone of voice seemed to be enough to calm him down and allow her to detangle his hands from her clothes. Successfully freed, Wasuke took his grandson into his arms. The kid looked up at him with big eyes, curling up into himself to avoid touching him as much as possible, before glancing desperately back over to the woman.

Leaning forward and ruffling his hair as a goodbye gesture, she told him, “Be nice and try not to hurt him, Yuuji. I will be back in about ten hours.” She straightened again and met his eyes. “Well then, see you in the evening. Bye-bye.” The woman gave him a last bright smile and waved before grabbing the door and decidedly shutting it in his face. Wasuke frowned at the door handle.

For the sake of Yuuji’s developing personality, he really hoped Jin was

the one who socialized most with the child. It was a relief though that his interactions with his parents seemed to be mostly positive for now.

Looking helplessly around the house, he decided to leave Yuuji by the low table in the living room, press the plushie into his arms and then bring all the food into the kitchen. After arranging everything on the counter near the cooking plate so he would have it ready when boiling the water later, he took a deep breath. It was just one day. He could do this. This was a good opportunity to find out how his son and especially his son's partner actually treated the boy. And to bond with his grandson.

Determined to get the kid to warm up to him, he returned to the living room. It was empty. Not even the plushie was there. His first instinct was to look under the table. Nothing. He turned over the whole room. Looked under every surface, behind every shelf, inside any closet. Nothing. Not even 10 minutes and he had already lost the child, great. But this was an infant, just a little over four months old, he couldn't have gotten that far.

A loud crash in the corridor alerted him to the location of the person he already knew was a little troublemaker in spe. Surely enough, Yuuji was sitting in the *genkan* and wrestling with a black umbrella he had pulled out of the wooden holder. Said case had fallen over in the process, creating the crash. Yuuji ignored him, maneuvering the object around with surprising ease. Still, Wasuke could already see how the pointy end of the umbrella would inevitably end up in one of their eyes.

"Hey, why don't you put that away and we find you something else to play with," he said in what he hoped was a calming voice, while slowly edging closer.

When he was only a few steps away, Yuuji found the button to open up the umbrella. It jumped to life, startling the boy and causing both grandson and grandfather to fall back. The boy was the first one to recover. He sat up again and broke out into a giggle, awkwardly clapping his hands. Crawling forward on his hands and knees, he grabbed the handle of the umbrella and shook it, getting dangerously close to Wasuke's shins.

Sensing an opportunity, the old man grabbed another fallen umbrella, one with multicoloured stripes, and sat down on the ground next to his grandson. When he was sure that Yuuji's attention was on him, he unfolded the object and let it snap open. The boy was delighted,

laughing once more. The light falling from the window above the entrance door cast a rainbow through the rainproof fabric onto the floor. Wasuke twirled the pole a bit, creating a carousel of colours around them.

The infant was delighted, having completely forgotten his previous apprehension. They spend a good while playing in the *genkan*. This time Wasuke made sure he was the one handling the umbrellas to avoid any more accidents, closing them and snapping them open again to entertain the boy. Eventually, he had to get up though, his hips weren't liking the hard ground and he doubted it was that comfortable for the baby either.

Having braved the initial awkwardness, taking care of the child got a lot easier. He was still touching things he wasn't supposed to, curiously exploring the house, but he at least wasn't scared and hiding, and generally complied when Wasuke took potentially dangerous objects away from him. Still, he was moving around way too fast and the old man had at times trouble keeping up with him. It seemed unusual that Yuuji was already able to crawl around on hands and knees - had Jin been this agile at that age? - so the speed at which he was doing it was even more mind boggling.

There were other strange things about him. Not only could he flip over the living room table, he was also able to pull himself up onto low surfaces, often forcing Wasuke to pick him out of the compartments of his bookshelves. When feeding him, he noticed that Yuuji was growing teeth. Seven so far from what he could see, four on the top and three on the bottom with the hint of a fourth one trying to break through. Remembering countless sleepless nights, he knew that four months was usually the start of teething but this development seemed quite fast.

After the initial excitement for the new environment had ebbed off, the grandfather was able to get the child to sleep for a few hours. In the afternoon, he managed to keep Yuuji occupied by showing him a photography book about birds. Tightly clutching his plushie to his chest, he seemed especially enraptured by the multicoloured feathers of the parrots and peacocks. Trying his best to remember interesting facts about the animals, Wasuke made sure to tell the boy something about every picture. Not that factual accuracy mattered much. Seeing Yuuji's quiet joy made him think of the times when he had still read bedtime stories to Jin. His son hadn't been such a ball of energy - that seemed much more a trait he had inherited from Kaori - but in these quieter moments, the semblance was undeniable. He smiled down at

the toddler. Whatever Jin was doing with that woman, it appeared like his grandson was healthy in both body and mind.

Leaving Yuuji for a moment alone with the images of kingfishers, he went into his room and picked a framed photo from the desk. When he returned, he shut the book, and put the photo on top of it. After looking at it curiously, leaning forward a little bit, the boy reached out and slapped his hand in the middle of it.

“Baba!”

Peeling the child’s hand away revealed a slight imprint on the glass, right over Jin’s face. It was a photo they had taken inside a *ryokan* near Sapporo. In the background you could see the wooden sliding doors and behind them a hint at the milky water and mist of the *onsen*. Jin was in the center with Wasuke to his right and Kaori to his left, all smiling brightly into the camera.

“Yes, that is your Papa,” the man affirmed with a benign chuckle. He held the image closer for Yuuji so he could get a good look and pointed at Kaori. “You never met her, but this is your mother. Mama.”

The boy stared at the photo, squinted a little and then looked up to his grandfather, shaking his head. Wasuke was impressed that he could tell. To him the difference seemed obvious but that even such a young child would be able to see it, from a photograph no less, was surprising.

He ran his hand over his grandson’s head. “You are too young to understand this but this is your real mother. Not that imposter. It’s complicated. I will tell you more about it when you are a little older.”

Yuuji stared at him quietly, head leaning slightly to the side, obviously confused. Then he started talking. Or babbling would be a better way to put it. Sounds and syllables fell past his lips, accompanied by waving gestures. His grandfather had no idea what he was trying to say or if it was even related to the current topic.

Sighing but nodding along with a smile to the excited barrage he mused that it might be best to wait for the teenage years before breaching the subject again. He wasn’t looking forward to crushing his grandson’s rosey view of the person that had brought him here. No matter how important, this wasn’t something that was easy to swallow for a child. Or anyone. There was a certain comfort in knowing that Yuuji was at least able to differentiate the two people. That might make things easier later on.



In the evening, said person showed up again at precisely 10 pm. The toddler had long fallen asleep by that point. He stirred when she lifted him up into her arms. It pained Wasuke to hear the quiet mumble of 'Mama'. He had to tell the boy the truth when he was young or he would end up like his father.

*6 months, 2 days: the vessel pulled itself up on a chair and was able to stand. It fell again after approximately 15 seconds despite the support. The knees were too weak to hold the weight of its body.*

*6 months, 11 days: the vessel can stand up and keep standing for a prolonged period of time with support. Without support it can stand for approximately 20 seconds.*

They were sitting cross-legged on a light blanket in Nakada Central Park. The sun was still providing some comfort despite the fresh autumn weather. Jin was kneeling opposite of them, holding Yuuji steady by the waist, while the infant stumbled from his crouched position up onto his feet to grasp after the bubbles Kenjaku was blowing just slightly out of reach. After having caught his footing, their son raised his arms up into the sky. Jin let go of him and watched with warm laughter in his eyes how Yuuji flailed his hands around in the air.

Then the child suddenly took a step forward, trying to follow a swarm of little bubbles. Against their expectations, it didn't make him fall face first to the ground. Instead, he was immediately taking another unsteady step and caught himself. Fascinated, Kenjaku lowered the blowstick from their lips and put their full attention on their son's body language. His knees weren't buckling yet and despite losing his balance for a moment he stayed upright. He could be able to walk further.

Seeing Yuuji slow down to stare after an especially big bubble, they put the toy away and called out to him, beckoning him closer. "Keep going, keep going, you're doing great. Come over here." There was genuine delight in their voice. This was a major breakthrough.

Looking over to them, he did another quick step forward with a

determination that matched the one projected in their voice. He was able to make one final step before his foot caught in a wrinkle of the blanket and he fell, the impact only softened by his hands which he had instinctively pulled up to his chest. Unperturbed, he looked up to them, seemingly waiting for approval. They picked him up and sat him on their lap.

“That was great. Four steps in one go is a good start,” they praised him. Seeing Jin break out of his mesmerisation and making a move to join them, they motioned him to stay put. “Let’s see if you can do that again.” Putting him back on his feet, they pointed to their partner. “Go to your father. Give him a hug.”

Jin leaned forward with a bright smile, excitement tinging his cheeks a light pink. “Come over here my boy!”

Taking their hands away when Yuuji had found his balance, they watched closely as he managed to breach the distance between his parents with six steps. Before the infant could fall down again, his father picked him up and lifted him high in the air, both of them laughing.

“That was amazing,” Jin exclaimed. “Even further than before, incredible!” While supporting the child on his legs, he pulled Kenjaku into a tight embrace as they crawled over to join the two. They returned his hug by sliding an arm behind his back. “Only half a year and he’s already walking. Unbelievable. Argh, I should have filmed it.” He gave them a kiss on the cheek. “Our special boy.”

They leaned their head against Jin’s and looked down at the child in question. “That he is.” Yuuji grasped the finger they stretched out to him, and the two engaged in a little tug-of-war, a game only Kenjaku could play with him now after the boy had accidentally broken Jin’s finger. “He’s better than I expected. I thought it would take him another week.”

“What great praise,” he joked. “Did you hear that, Yuuji? You actually made your mother proud.”

“I’m always proud of him,” they retorted, tapping the child’s hand to indicate that he should let go.

“Then you are bad at showing it.” Jin teased. He reached up and gently massaged the scar tissue on their temple with his fingertips.

Kenjaku closed their eyes and let out a deep breath, enjoying the

relaxing sensation. “I will tell him when I think he needs to hear it.”

Over the course of the afternoon, Yuuji made a few more attempts at walking but didn't manage to top his six steps. Spooning Jin and settling their chin on his shoulder, they watched how father and son played together. A feeling of contentment filled them. Finally they could move on to the last stage of their Sendai plan. The most crucial one. If the child survived the poison - and they were quite confident that he would - that would settle the matter of Sukuna's vessel for now and they could focus completely on the Prison Realm and the Star Plasma Vessel. Their new body was selected and it would only be a matter of days until it died.

After a millennia of planning, the fruition of all their work was only a decade or two away. They smiled into the crook of Jin's neck, languidly running their fingers over his chest, tracing the hard outlines of the ring under his sweater, and feeling him lean further into them at the carassing touch. With their stay in Sendai coming to an end, that would also mean parting from him. The prospect actually brought some reluctance with it. Just a year ago they wouldn't have given it a second thought, but with how their day-to-day life had shaped out to be, falling into the comfort of domesticity had proven rather tempting.

Jin turned out to be better company than they had initially expected. Him not whining as much over his dead wife and fretting over his father certainly helped. Most importantly, nurturing his morbid curiosity and twisted mind had become somewhat of a side project for them, eager to see just how much he was willing to accept before crossing a line. If that line even existed and wasn't just a contrail.

Yuuji hurting him by breaking his finger had shocked him but after Kenjaku healed the injury and lectured the child on properly controlling his strength around the more fragile family members, Jin had seemingly pushed down all concerns and instead marveled at how exceptional their son was. Not that Kenjaku didn't agree, but it was an unusual reaction. Wasuke certainly thought different, even if he hadn't questioned Yuuji's abilities to their face yet.

Another thing they appreciated about their partner were his skills in the bedroom and openness to change things up. A great comfort considering their current bodily disposition. His willingness to adapt made sex much easier. With a one-night stand they'd need to lay out and accommodate a whole new set of boundaries, while with him things fell together quite naturally. Not many complications up to this

point.

They shifted a little closer to Jin and trailed their hands further down his body, grazing his midriff and inner thigh. Noticing their shifting attention, the man craned his neck to look back at them.

“I think we should head back,” they mumbled into his ear. “We have something to celebrate, don’t we?” Emphasising the ‘we’, they made sure he understood that they weren’t talking about throwing Yuuji a party. Kenjaku had a lot to celebrate and a very clear idea of how they wanted to do it.

Jin raised a questioning eyebrow but before he could say anything one of their hands reached his crotch, making him jump. Lightning-fast he grab their wrist and closed his legs.

“We are in public,” he hissed, cheeks and ears almost matching his hair. He was so easy to tease.

“Yes, that’s why I’m saying we should go home,” they grinned. Wringing their hand out of his grasp, they interlocked their fingers and pressed a kiss on that one spot on his neck that always made the man shiver.

As expected, Jin let out a small gasp. “Okay, okay, we can go.” He almost sprang out of their arms and made a show of busying himself with collecting their belongings. “You really are impossible, you know that?” Underneath his huffing there was a smile pulling on his lips. Kenjaku chuckled and moved to help him pack up.

*6 months, 17 days: the vessel took its first steps. 4 on the first attempt, 6 on the second one that occurred shortly after. Advance physical training. Will begin the final stage of the introduction phase.  
(note: moving, colourful toys proven method to facilitate quick physical & mental progress in young subjects, applicable to non-humans?)*

The tea had cooled down to an agreeable room temperature. They hadn’t boiled much, only one sencha cup full, but it was more than enough for today’s endeavor. One tablespoon of Uraume’s baby food had already been prepared in a small bowl, the only thing left being mixing the two materials together. In gradual circular motions they poured the Urushi tea over the pulp and then used the handle of the

spoon to intermingle the substance with the food. After washing off the residuals and cleaning the teacup in the sink, they collected bowl, spoon and a roll of paper towels, and made their way to the bathroom.

Yuuji was already sitting on the white tile floor, idly inspecting his naked feet. In anticipation of the mess this experiment would create, they had left him in just his diaper. Cleaning up would be much easier this way. A radio-controlled clock was standing on the ground by the toilet with their latest notebook and a pen lying next to it. They closed the door behind them and sat down cross-legged across from their son. The paper towels were put to the side for now.

He had only had a little bit of milk an hour ago when Jin had gone to work. Better not put too much in his stomach. If he was hungry, he would be more likely to eat his food without need for pressure.

Kenjaku scraped the majority of the mixture onto the table spoon and held it up to the child. With a smile they encouraged him, "Come Yuuji, eat up. It's fruits with oats and heart, your favourite."

Like the well-behaved child he was, he opened his mouth and ate the first nibble without complaint. Quickly, they scooped the rest from the bowl up on the spoon and impatiently waited for him to swallow the first bite down. As expected, he pulled a face when the foreign taste spread over his tongue but the mixture slid past his throat before he could spit it out. Yuuji stuck his tongue out and put his fingers in his mouth, whining a bit.

They pried his hands away and hovered the second spoonful closer to his lips. The infant scrunched up his face and turned away. "It's just one more bite. This one is smaller than the last, see?" Yuuji shook his head, turning his whole upper torso with it. "You will make me very proud if you manage to eat this. It's the last one."

Still, he refused, scratching at his neck and whimpering. The aftertaste of the Urushi bark seemed to be really setting in now. When he next opened his mouth to cough, they quickly snug the spoon between his lips, forced the remains to the back of his throat and then pulled it clean out. Before the child had time to voice his dissatisfaction, they clammed their hand over his mouth and nose and pressed their thumb up under his chin to keep his mouth shut.

"Don't make this difficult, boy," their smile became a little strained, "Just swallow and get this over with."

Under muffled screams he pawned and pulled at their arm, contorting underneath their grasp, trying to escape. If he had been dealing with a regular person, he might have succeeded. His nails left tiny scratches along their wrist. Kenjaku put their other hand behind his head to keep him steady. His protests became louder and tears started to form at the corner of his eyes. By now, his whole body was convulsing, feet trampling against the floor. Then they saw the telltale sign of the larynx bobbing up and down.

Slowly, they removed their hand from his airways. The infant instantly began to bawl but that at least gave them a good look at the empty insides of his mouth. They checked the time and picked up their notebook, leaning back against the toilet.

*6 months, 19 days: start Urushi Tea Experiment at 09:13. Vessel has eaten the full prescribed amount (15g) at 09:15 under protest.*

“That wasn’t so bad now, right? If you had just eaten like I told you to, I wouldn’t have needed to use force.”

Crouching on his hands and knees, the infant was crying and panting, gasping for breath. Kenjaku put their pen between the pages and rested their notebook in their lap, silently watching the vessel. Leaning forward, they pulled the bowl and spoon to the side, getting them out of the way for what was to come.

After his breathing had evened out, the boy sat back and again tried to get the taste off of his tongue with his fingers. When that didn’t achieve anything, he looked over to them and hesitantly stretched out his arms to the only other source of comfort he had at the moment. Kenjaku ignored him.

It was quite impressive that so far the only negative side effect was the taste. The pure lacquer from the tree could already poison through touch and fumes. While that effect was mellowed out in the bark and additionally diluted in this case by the extra food, there was still a high chance that in children the effects would appear immediately after ingestion.

Desperate for some solace, the infant began crawling over to them. He didn’t get very far. Suddenly, he flinched and curled in on himself, his arms clasped around his body. Kenjaku picked up their pen again. Quiet sobs escaped the pained bundle. Small shivers heightened into shakes. When he fell to the side and curled into a tight ball, they could faintly hear the chattering of the few teeth that had already grown in.

*01:14 minutes after ingestion: chills and signs of stomach pain*

More and more often, the sobs were disrupted by coughs. Soon, they could see the first instances of heaving. A thin layer of sweat had appeared on his body. Then it happened. The vessel straightened a little and pushed himself up with his hands, his eyes wide in shock and mouth open in a silent scream. His body convulsed once, twice, then vomit splashed on the white floor.

*~01:48 min a.l.: sweating and vomiting, start of dehydrating process*

Putting their notes aside for a moment, they stepped closer and dragged the crying infant away from the puddle of puke, making sure that he was lying on his side so he wouldn't choke. Ripping off a couple of paper towels, they began to clean up the mess. Another benefit of doing this so early in his life was that a small body had a small stomach with less content that could be regurgitated. The puke was very watery and only the volume of a regular tea cup but the smell still stung in the nose.

They couldn't help but reflect on the irony of the vessel throwing up in the same bathroom they had over a year ago. Back then, their sickness had been caused by its growing hunger and now they were the one bringing it into a similar condition by turning nutrition into poison. Of course that similarity hadn't been their intention, just a funny coincidence really. A sign of life repeating itself in a circular motion one could say.

Throwing the last drenched paper into the toilet, they turned around to the vessel again. It was retching but so far nothing came out. The evidence was gone but the stench of vomit still hung heavy in the air. Nonetheless, they didn't want to risk opening the door yet.

The sweat had accumulated and was now running in thick droplets down its face, mixing with tears. Kenjaku squatted down and held the back of their hand against its forehead and neck. Heightened temperature but not critical. As they rubbed some of the sweat and tears away from the puffy eyes, a sweaty hand padded against theirs. The grip lacked its usual strength, not even Wasuke would be hurt by this. They gave it an encouraging smile before brushing the small hand aside and standing up to search for a thermometer in the mirrored cabinet.

*09:18, Temperature of 38,9°C (measured under armpit, actual temperature estimated ~0,3°C higher) trending upwards, still acceptable condition*

It didn't take long for the vomiting to pick up again. The process happened in several little spurts, disrupted by the vessels crying and shaking. Nausea forced it into heaving but the desperate gasps for air and sniveling made the subject accidentally swallow the puke back down, resulting in even more spluttering. Finally, Kenjaku had enough of the nasty display and decided to hurry the detoxification process along. Immobilizing the vessel's feeble struggles by slinging an arm around its torso, they shoved a finger down its throat until all that came out were the last acidic contents of the stomach.

*09:21, vomiting for 01:13 min until only gastric acid disgorged*

They opened the door to let some fresh air in. It didn't look like the vessel would be going anywhere any time soon. He was lying on his side, limbs slightly pulled in in an attempt to ease the strain that had been put on his stomach. Wet hair was sticking to his head like seaweed on a rock. At the moment he was barely conscious, only releasing heavy rasping breaths that shook his entire body. His fever had risen to over 41,5°C. Seemed like it was about time to clean and pack up. The most eventful part was over but the truly dangerous risks of the experiment still laid ahead. Now they had to make sure he stayed alive until his body had managed to accustom to the poison. Which could take days.

They wiped up the last yellow splotches of bile and flushed the paper down the toilet. Grabbing a softer towel, they lifted the vessel's head from the floor and wiped the last remains of spit and vomit from his mouth. He groaned and instinctively tried to pull away but didn't have the strength to resist them. Draping the towel over their shoulder to catch any accidents, they lifted him up into their arms and carried him out of the bathroom.

On the changing table, they tentatively unwound the diaper, dreading what they would find. Urushi tea caused a rapid loss of bodily fluids, something which occurred not only through vomiting and sweat. They had to hold their breath through the whole ordeal. Instead of putting him in a new diaper, they decided to run him a lukewarm bath to get him properly cleaned up.

The water was warm enough to soothe his shivering but not so hot that it would exacerbate the fever. While kneeling beside the bathtub and holding his head above the water with one hand, they settled their other arm on the edge of the tub and watched Yuuji come back into the realm of lucidity. His eyes fluttered open, staring aimlessly into nothingness. After one, two lazy blinks, his gaze wandered to the



side. Amber eyes met equal golden fire. They smiled down at him. Lifting a hand, he grabbed for their arm and pushed, twisting his torso from side to side to try to free himself without much success.

“You don’t like me anymore?” they chuckled. “Don’t worry, I will be gone in a few days.” Their son’s face scrunched up as they brushed their thumb over his cheek. “Think of it this way, the quicker you recover, the faster I will be gone. So get well soon, alright?”

The grip around their wrist grew lax and his hand dropped back into the water, his eyes falling shut as well. They combed their fingers through his hair and washed away the last salty stains of tears before hoisting him out of the tub and wrapping him in a towel. When redressing him, they went for light materials and shorts to allow for a quick change of the cold compresses around his thighs.

Spreading out a towel on the couch, they laid the infant down, draped a wet cloth over his forehead and gave him another one to suck on. Comfortably settling down beside him, they put their legs up on the living room table, next to a bottle with ice water, and began reviewing their writing from the last half hour, adding little notes here and there.

The cold compresses seemed to work but that just meant that Yuuji currently wasn’t on the verge of death. Any other child would already begin to suffer brain damage with a body temperature this high. That he was able to hold on for this long, was a good sign. Just what they expected of Sukuna’s future vessel.

Kenjaku was deeply engrossed in the last chapters of one of the old psycho-thrillers Kaori had collected, when they heard the apartment door open and the familiar sounds of Jin dropping his working bag on the floor and shuffling around in the corridor. As his steps drew nearer, he gave them an exhausted but cheerful greeting that they returned absentmindedly. The man squatted down in front of Yuuji.

“Hey my boy, what happened? Are you unwell?” he asked, voice light but speckered with hints of concern.

“He seems to have caught a cold. Must be the changing season,” they offered as an explanation, looking up from their book.

Jin frowned. “But he was completely fine this morning. The usual ball of energy.”

“Children often get sick very suddenly. It’s fine, he just has to sleep it off.” Kenjaku kept a close eye on their partner’s expression as he felt their son’s cheeks and checked the cold compress on his thighs.

“He is burning up,” he exclaimed. Becoming aware of his father’s presence, Yuuji opened his eyes and reached his arms out. Jin lifted him up, taking the washcloth from his forehead and putting it on the boy’s nape instead, and let him wrap his arms around his neck. “This seems serious. I think we should bring him to a hospital. How long has he been like this? Why didn’t you call me?”

They put the book away and rightened themselves, taking their legs from the table. “It started a few hours ago. I didn’t want to unnecessarily worry you,” they said, projecting calm and confidence.

“Well, I am worrying now,” Jin sighed. As he slowly stroked over the child’s back, he noticed it shaking as Yuuji broke out into quiet sobs. “Hey hey, it’s alright, you will be alright. We will have a doctor take a look at you and then you will be up and running in no time.” Turning to Kenjaku, he continued. “Let’s take him to the hospital, just to be sure.”

“No.” The man was already about to walk away, but their firm answer made him come to a halt. He shot them a questioning look. “You know Yuuji is different. If we take him there, they will ask questions, take tests. I don’t want that attention on him.” Jin thoughtfully looked down at the infant he was swaying in his arms. “He just has to rest for a few days and stay hydrated, until this has blown over.”

Their partner hummed, still trying to calm Yuuji down. Suddenly, he stopped and gave them a quizzical look, seemingly searching for something on their face.

“You are right, he is different. We have had no problems with his teething so far. He hasn’t had any skin irritation. Not a sniffle, never even a serious scratch.” He walked closer and fixated them with a stare that was almost suspicious. “So why does he suddenly have a cold? And such a severe one?”

Someone was using his head today. Usually, Kenjaku loved it when he surprised them like that but in this case it could turn out to be quite inconvenient. Good thing Uraume wasn’t here to escalate the situation. The calm smile stayed on their lips. “He was going to get sick eventually and if it was going to happen, it makes sense that it would be a more severe illness, don’t you think?”

Jin seemed to mull the argument over. Then, he squatted down in front of them and picked Yuuji's arms from his shoulders, turning him around and making a move to sit him on his mother's lap. The infant struggled, wide eyes staring horrified up at them before he buried his head in his father's legs, body quivering from heavy sobs. Maybe they should've been a little nicer to him in the bathroom. They weren't used to accommodating for the long-term effects their experiments could have on children. Compared to what they had done in the past, this hadn't even been that severe. Raising kids sure was hard.

Their partner looked between their weeping son and Kenjaku, horror was dawning on his face. Hurriedly, he gathered Yuuji up and tried to sooth him with backrubs and gentle swaying. He stumbled back a few steps before catching himself and regarding them with eyes full of hurt and betrayal.

"I am going to call my boss and take the next days - or weeks or however long it will take - off until Yuuji is feeling better." His voice was shaking.

They stood up. "You don't need-"

"No," he interrupted them, making Kenjaku raise an eyebrow in surprise. "He is my son too. I have to do what any parent does in this situation and take care of him." Jin hesitated, worrying his lip. "Yuuji needs support right now, not only medically but emotionally too... and I'm not sure you can give that to him."

He turned around and walked towards in the direction of their bedroom. Before he left the room, they called out, "Don't go to a hospital."

"I won't," his words were faint. "Yuuji has gone through enough, I don't want him probed by strangers too."

Even when the door had already closed, Kenjaku stared after him deep in thought. This could've gone better. But if they broke the situation down to it's essentials, this didn't change much. Jin would be the one bringing Yuuji back to good health, with Kenjaku only keeping an eye on the progress and supplying medicine if needed, but they were going to leave in a few days anyway. They could leave right now, and only check in on their son from afar but that could become a disadvantage on the odd chance that Yuuji died.

In that case, it would surely take some convincing to make Jin agree to sleep with them again. Now that he had an idea of what really

happened, he would likely blame them for his death and it would be difficult to talk him out of that mindset. They should've taken a sperm sample. How careless. Seems like they had to make sure that their son survived. Pacing through the living room, they contemplated what to do the following days, and how best to end all of this when it was time to move on.

At night, Kenjaku gently knocked on Jin's door and when hearing nothing, swiftly entered. The bedside lamp was still on and illuminating Jin lying in bed, legs set up, with their son sleeping on his chest. He had put a towel underneath the child, and as the little yellow-brown stains revealed, it had been needed. There was a bowl of water on the bedside table with two washcloths hanging from the edges. Jin was still awake, reading.

He didn't say anything when they entered. Since they weren't being turned away, they took a seat near his feet. "How is he doing?"

Jin was staring at his book but clearly not reading. "Not much has changed but at least he was able to fall into a restful sleep." He put the book away and rightened himself a little against the headboard. Yuuji stirred but didn't wake. "When I take him to the bathroom he starts crying, and it smells heavily of detergent in there. What happened?"

"That is where he started vomiting. It was pretty difficult to clean up," they answered truthfully. "He must connect the room with his sickness." Their partner stared off to the side, frowning in thought. Kenjaku lifted the little bottle in their hand and put it on the nightstand. "It's milk you don't have to heat up. It helps with rehydration and also provides the necessary nutrients to bring Yuuji back on his feet as fast as possible."

He examined the drink. "This must have taken a while to make. You prepared this in advance, right?" Their eyes met. "You planned for this?"

Jin was on a roll today, probably airing out all the doubts he had had during their relationship. "Yes," they answered simply. There was a certain drive in them to encourage his current quest for truth. How would he react if he truly understood what was going on?

The man sighed and lifted his glasses to rub his eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

Kenjaku contemplated what would be a good answer to give, how much they wanted him to know. "You can think of it like a paediatric disease. Going through this will encourage immunisation and it is better for him to experience it now than in his later years, where it could have more serious consequences."

"More serious than this?" Jin looked down at their child, a crease of worry between his eyebrows. "Why does he need to go through all this in the first place?"

"I told you before. I am planning to evolve humanity beyond its current capabilities, and for that, our son is a key component. To fulfill his role, he will inevitably go through some hardships," they explained. It was clear that Jin had tried hard to ignore that part of their agreement. As they had wanted him to, up until this point. "This will make it easier for him."

Again, he worried his lip. A dark red spot had formed under his canine teeth. "Right, your plan. This is a lot and I don't really understand it but... what I want to know is..." He hesitated but eventually continued with more firmness in his voice, "Is something like this going to happen again? Are you going to kill Yuuji? Do you want to kill him?"

Kenjaku sighed and leaned forward. "I am not going to force him through pain like this again." They laid a hand on Jin's leg, turning fully serious. "And I am not going to kill him. It has taken too much to get to this point, I am not going to just throw it away." Hesitantly, their partner reached out for their hand and gently traced their fingers. They clasped his hand. "I promise you, I will not kill Yuuji."

Jin searched their eyes for proof of the sincerity in their words. Whatever he found, it seemed to console him for now. "Okay." He let go of their hand. "I need some time to think about this."

They nodded and stood up. "I understand. We can talk more tomorrow." Before leaving they turned back one more time. "Good night."

It took him a while, but eventually he mumbled, "Good night."

Rolling their head from side to side caused a loud pop from their cervical spine. Their shoulders made a similar sound as they stretched their arms. This sofa was definitely not made to be slept on for more than a couple of hours. Kenjaku tentatively probed their ribs. The tape should be changed but at this point they couldn't bring themselves to care what state Kaori's boobs were in when they left this body. As long as it didn't come off, it was fine.

It seemed like Jin wasn't up yet. With Yuuji still firmly in his hands there wasn't much to do, so they started to cook some rice for breakfast and went about collecting the few personal belongings they had at this apartment, most importantly their notebooks. They were absentmindedly staring at the rice cooker, evaluating where best to deposit their things after moving out, when Jin entered the kitchen. Despite sleeping in a bed, he didn't look very rested.

The morning began a little awkwardly with only some terse conversation.

"How is Yuuji?" they asked while peeling open *edamame* pods.

"Better. But his fever is still over 40°C." He was wolfing down the rice, wanting to get this over with fast and return to their son. "He hasn't thrown up the milk you prepared yet. I think it is working."

"Good. I will prepare some more then."

Kenjaku watched Jin change and feed the boy and put new cold compresses on his legs, hovering in the doorway until the man said they should leave because they were freaking the kid out too much. So they instead went out and relocated the majority of the research material from the apartment. In the afternoon, Jin seemed to have finally made up his mind. They were writing down the progress in Yuuji's health when he joined them, sitting down across from them on the couch.

"Listen," he started, his demeanor was more assured now. "I can't forgive you for what you have done. You hurt Yuuji, our son. You severely traumatized him. No matter what reasons you had for it, that was wrong and inexcusable." He took a deep breath. "Still, we are a family. And as a family, I think we should try together to move past this." Grabbing their hand, he leaned forward, eyes imploring. "We worked so well together before. I don't want to throw that away."

Jin paused to give Kenjaku a chance to say something. They had a hard time keeping their expression neutral. "I see."

It wasn't much, but for him it seemed enough to continue. "I know you have your reasons for not sharing certain information but I at least want you to not lie to me. Especially where it concerns our son. You can't make decisions like this without consulting me. I am his father, I want to be included in your plans for him. So be honest with me."

Honesty, huh. They just had one or two days together anyway. Yuuji seemed on his way to make a full recovery, so at this stage it really didn't matter if he knew. He had gotten past what they had told him yesterday, maybe he was insane enough to swallow the truth.

"Okay."

Jin's face brightened up a little. "So you will discuss any plans you might have for Yuuji with me? I seriously think you could benefit from it too. I can help him warm up to you again."

"Sure," they said slowly. "I can talk with you about it."

He gave them an impossibly warm smile and squeezed their hand. "I'm glad we can be open like this."

Kenjaku hummed. Well, it didn't really matter in the grand scheme. Might as well take a last look at his broken psyche. They picked their notebook from the table and flipped to the most recent page. "Here."

Surprised, Jin took the book and started reading. An interesting array of emotions wandered across his face. Confusion, horror, disgust, worry. Not a sign of regret yet.

After flipping through the pages once more, he looked up to them and quietly said, "Why do you describe Yuuji as an 'it'? Don't you see him as a person?" His face looked pained.

"I try to use neutral language in my reports," they evaded.

"The 'Urushi' here, does that refer to the tree? The one used for lacquer? You gave our son lacquer?" his voice rose in volume.

Kenjaku repositioned themselves to get more comfortable. This would take a lot of explaining. "Yes, it's from that same tree but I used the bark not the pure liquid, as you might have read, and it was further diluted by food. Monks used to drink this tea when attempting *sokushinbutsu*. It is an old method used to drain all fluids and also to make their bodies poisonous to avoid flies and maggots." Jin still

looked confused. “In the far future Yuuji will have to ingest parts of a body that has successfully undergone *sokushinbutsu* . To prepare him for the detrimental effect this will have on his body, I conducted this experiment.”

The man blinked a few times, speechless. “That... I... so this is why you call him a ‘vessel?’” he parsed together.

“Yes. That flesh will become part of him and that’s why he is a vessel.” Certain things were best kept vague.

Jin buried his face in his hands, massaging his temples, overwhelmed by all the new information. It took him several minutes until he dropped his hands and thoughtfully rubbed his chin. With a deep exhausted sigh he met their eyes again.

“Thank you for letting me read this. The extra information is... enlightening.” He nervously licked his lips. “But what really concerns me and I think is the most important part here, is that you could have treated Yuuji better.”

They would like to say that they were surprised that Jin chose to ignore the prospect of their son eating a dead body but they should have expected that at this point. Being unable to suppress a smile, they retorted, “What do you mean?”

Their partner held up the notebook and pointed to the section describing the ingestion process. “You used unnecessary force. No wonder he is scared of you. Just reading it is traumatising. He is a child, you can’t treat him this way. We aren’t forcing his food down his throat when he doesn’t want to eat lunch, so why are you doing it here?” He was becoming more agitated, gesturing with the book. “And when he is in pain, when he is vomiting, you have to support him! Hug him, talk to him, try to calm him down. I thought you bonded with him over the past months?”

Kenjaku let the barrage of words wash over them, amazed how worked up he had gotten over this. While Jin was clearly hurt, this didn’t seem as much an accusation as desperation and an offer for improvement. They were always willing to improve their experiments if possible.

“I guess I could have been more gentle,” they replied. At the concession, the man seemed to deflate a little. They decided to push him a little further. “So what you are saying is, if I ever do an experiment like this again, you want to be there and assist? Make sure



Yuuji is feeling well?"

Their partner hesitated for a moment, his eyes nervously flicking to the sides in search for an answer. "I...Yes. If you don't think you can do it, I will help you and be there for him."

A short humourless laugh escaped them. Kenjaku reached out and cupped Jin's face between their hands, pulling him closer. Clear eyes stared back at them. So naive. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Their fingers dug deeper into his head.

"One day I will open up your skull and thoroughly study your brain."

He laughed uneasily. The sound died down at their silence and the intense look they regarded him with. "Really?"

"Really."

His eyes widened minimally, then his gaze turned contemplative. Slowly, he reached up and brushed a thumb over the scars on their forehead. A familiar pained and melancholic expression shadowed his face.

"I'm alright with that," he whispered.

Their borrowed heart sped up. They were reminded of their first meeting. Throat suddenly dry, they licked their lips. "You can see mine too," they offered hoarsely.

Jin's eyes broke away from their forehead, meeting theirs again. "What do you mean?"

"My brain, you can see it. In the future. If you want to," their gaze burned into him.

"Yours?" he mumbled.

"Mine. The only thing of my original body that's still left." Kenjaku reached up, enclaspng his hand with their own and forcing his fingers to dig deeper into their flesh. Part of them wished he would cut up the old wounds and relieve them from doing the surgery themselves. "In here."

His tongue wetted his lips. Then he breathed, "Show me."

Teeth scraped against the inside of their skull as Kenjaku opened their mouth. Kaori's mirrored the motion, letting out a moan. "I can't, not

right now. But at some point in the future we will do it.”

Jin traced his hand to the back of their head and pressed their foreheads together. “Okay.”

Unable to contain themselves anymore, they grabbed his shoulders and pushed him down into the bolsters. The evidence that he was getting as desperate as they were, pushed up against their pelvis. “I need you inside me,” they rasped into his ear, while fumbling with their pants.

In a moment of lucidity, Jin pressed out, “What about Yuuji?”

“He will survive being alone for a little longer.”

Kenjaku quietly stepped into the bedroom, only shallowly alit by the city lights from outside the window. Solely the sound of the steady breathing from Yuuji and Jin could be heard. Their son’s temperature had decreased to around 39°C. He had been more aware and active today, crawling around a bit and drinking on his own. By tomorrow he likely wouldn’t even have heightened temperature anymore. Uraume had finally gotten off their back about his condition too. They still had some thoughts about Jin, but Kenjaku wasn’t taking criticism on that front.

Two and a half days for recovery, exactly like they had calculated. There was nothing holding them here anymore. Everything had been taken care of. When they left this apartment, it would be for the last time.

They opened the wardrobe and randomly grabbed one of Jin’s sweaters. It was too dark to see which one but it didn’t really matter. The transfer process would likely soil it anyway. While pulling on the hoodie, they walked towards Yuuji’s cot that was standing in the corner of the room. When they were about to kneel in front of it, something solid poked into their upper thigh. Sliding their hand into their pocket, they fished out a ring hanging from a chain.

Turning in the grey light, it looked more metal than silver. A dull phantom of happiness reared its head in the back of their mind. Ghosts of feelings and wishes Kaori used to associate with the object.

For a moment they considered leaving it here. Their eyes fell on the silhouette of Jin, curled up and deeply asleep. Maybe it would be more appropriate to entrust it to Kaori's body. The marriage documents had her name on it anyway, and as Wasuke liked to point out, the jewelry was originally intended for her. They languidly swaid the chain from side to side before catching the ring in their palm and putting it back into their pocket.

Squatting down in front of the cot, they smiled at the resting form of their son. The last two days they had kept their distance, not wanting to stress him and potentially worsen his condition. They reached out and lightly stroked his hand. Reflexively, he grabbed their finger in a tight fist. He almost had his full strength back. Jin would soon need to find someone else to take care of his child-induced injuries.

"Well, looks like this will be goodbye for now," Kenjaku whispered. "Be good to your father and grandfather, and grow up to become big and strong. You are probably glad that I'm gone. There isn't much I can do for you at the moment anyway. But I will keep a close eye on you, so don't disappoint me. When we see each other again, you won't recognize me. Different face, different sex, we won't even have the same eyes anymore." They chuckled and stroked his fist with their thumb. "I am looking forward to seeing who you have become at that point. Show your dear old *hahaue* what a truly special vessel you are." Tentatively as to not wake him, they peeled their finger out of his grip. "Don't let Sukuna push you around too much."

Jin blinked, eyes crusty with sleep. No matter how hard he struggled, something pulled him relentlessly into the waking world. At first, he didn't understand what had woken him up. Then, he heard an indistinct mumble. He lifted his heavy head and looked around the room. Seeing a dark figure at the end of his bed, nearly made him jump out of his skin. Hastily, he patted for his glasses on the nightstand. When his vision cleared, his panic subsided only minimally. Kaori was standing fully clothed in front of Yuuji's cot, staring down at the child. Remorseless descriptions of horrific acts involuntarily appeared inside his mind.

Willing his heart to calm down, he told himself that they had assured him that they wouldn't hurt their son anymore or that they would at

least talk about it with Jin beforehand. He dearly hoped the last part wasn't why they were up in the middle of the night. No, they had discussed this. They had settled this issue.

Reaching to the side, he fumbled for the lightswitch. The yellow glow of the bedside lamp gave the room a more humane touch and helped shoo away his dark thoughts. He noticed that the cushion and covers next to him had been tidied up. A glance at the clock told him that it was almost half past three. Even for them this was unusual. They would always come back in the middle of the night, not go away. Moreover, they had mostly shaken that habit since Yuuji had been born.

Kaori turned around to him. They were wearing the grey *Nike* hoodie he only put on during the odd times that he wanted to work out. Sitting up straighter and repressing a yawn, he asked, voice still husky with sleep, "Why are you up?"

"I am leaving," came the muted reply.

"Now?" He rubbed his hand over his face. "Why not go in the morning? What is so urgent?"

"There is a lot of work that needs taking care of and I want to waste as little time as possible," they replied.

"Okay." He still didn't understand why this meant they had to get up in the middle of the night. "When will you be back?"

"In about 14 to 16 years."

Jin hummed. He blinked once, twice, before his head shot up. "What did you just say?" His voice rose in volume before he could catch himself. Kaori gave him their usual serene smile, wordlessly confirming his question. Quickly, he threw his covers back and crawled over the bed until he was standing in front of them, only dressed in a tank top and boxer shorts. "What do you mean? Leaving? For years?"

They regarded him patiently. "It means that I am leaving for good. I will not come back to this apartment, but I will be coming back for Yuuji when he is older. As for you," Kaori leaned their head to the side and gave him a onceover. "We will see."

Jittery, he ran his fingers through his hair, not closer to making sense of their words. "I don't understand. Why are you leaving? Why now?"

His wife sighed. "You knew from the start this was only temporary. Be honest, did you really think I would stay here and raise Yuuji with you for 18 years?"

He didn't want to hear this. Not now. Not when their son was returning to health and things were beginning to shift back into some semblance of normality. What had passed as normal for them in the past months.

"I thought...", he was lost for words, too much to say but also nothing at all, "I thought you had changed your mind." Saying it out loud made him realize not even he believed in those words. But there had been something, some hope lit by the prospect of them opening up to him.

"No." Their gaze was unrelenting, as if all those riled up emotions inside him didn't even face them. "Yuuji surviving means my experiment was a success and there is nothing left for me to do here. I will change bodies and leave him in your care until it is time for him to fulfill his role."

This all sounded so final. It was going far too fast for his liking. Technically, this meant that his son would be a lot safer for now, but at the same time he couldn't even imagine a future with only him and Yuuji.

"Can't you change bodies and stay?" he said weakly, "I don't even expect you to interact much with Yuuji, just stay."

Kaori leaned their head to the side and studied him. "You do realize that Kaori will be dead for good then, right? A body without a brain is like a puppet without strings. It will be as lifeless as it was when it entered that hospital." They lifted their arms. "All this will be gone. I will have a new face, new voice, different stature, different genitals. To you, I will look like a stranger. Can you live with that?"

Thoughts were racing through his head, jumbled feelings building a lump in his throat. He wanted to say 'yes' but he just couldn't bring himself to. Before, he at times thought Kaori's eyes to be cold, imagining them completely lifeless was almost inconceivable. He had contemplated what would happen if Kaori completely disappeared, what his life would be like without her - without them. The mere thought boggled his mind. Being confronted with the possibility that these were his last minutes with Kaori and the person he knew as Kaori, was too much for him. Surely, something would happen,

something that would stop this. It couldn't be over just like that.

Seeing his turmoil, they reached out a hand and laid it comforting on his shoulder. "Honestly, I think this will be good for you. Gives you time to really grieve and get your life together. Learn to live on your own."

Jin clasped their arm for support. "What about what you said before? Of me helping you? And... being able to see you? What we talked about yesterday, did that mean nothing to you?" As strange as the request had been, at that moment he had for the first time really felt close to them. Like they fully understood each other, and were truly equal in this relationship.

The smile gradually faded from their lips. Their gaze turned inwards. Then they shifted their hand to grasp his neck, fingers threading through his hair, slightly dampened from nervous sweat. "I do want to do it. Before you die, I would like to open you up at least once, and I wanted you to feel my brain ever since you reached out to me in the hospital," they hesitated, eyes boring into his, causing hope to bubble up inside of him, "But I did tell you that we would do it in the future. For now, you are most helpful by raising Yuuji. As much as I enjoyed my time here with you, there are important things I need to do. Outside of Sendai. Outside of Japan."

His heart fell. It consoled him to know that they weren't completely indifferent to him, but still there seemed to be nothing he could say to change their mind. He let out a deep shaky breath. Tears were stinging his eyes. "But how am I supposed to take care of our son all on my own?"

Their demeanor brightened again. "Don't worry, I will send you as much money as you need. For everything else, just ask your father."

Jin let out a hollow laugh. "My father?"

They chuckled as well. "Yuuji seems to get along with him. Just leave him there during work hours and pick him up afterwards. Same thing I did." Reaching back, they pulled a folded note out of their back pocket and handed it to him. Frowning, he opened it, revealing a phone number. His eyes widened, seeing a lifeline thrown out to him. "If there are any issues - like people asking too many questions or concerns about Yuuji's health - call this number. They will help you out."

Jin's optimism faltered. "They? This isn't yours?"

“No. Depending on what I’m doing at the time, they can help you quicker than I. Of course, they will still inform me about what happened and I will keep an eye on you two anyway. If it’s necessary, you can talk to me too but only in an emergency,” they explained, looking agonizingly calm about the whole thing.

“So I am basically calling your customer service.” The only answer he got was the usual light smile. He didn’t like this. Despite what they had said before, they treated him like he was just some case file not their husband and the father of their child. In a last desperate attempt, he pulled them into a tight hug and buried his face in their shoulder. “I can’t do this. I need you here. Please, stay.”

A hand lightly padded his back, before grabbing him and forcing him to stand up straight again. “You always wanted a child. I gave you one. Now it’s up to you to take care of it. Good luck.”

They patted his cheek with a smile that didn’t quite reach their eyes. Leaning forward, they pressed a kiss on his lips.

“Wait...” The word came out slurred, he didn’t know what else he wanted to say. A numbing wave washed over him, ensnaring his mind and dragging him down into unconsciousness.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying on the ground in front of the bed. The back of his head hurt. Sitting up made him wince. For a moment he wasn’t sure if he hadn’t just dreamed the whole exchange. Through the window he could see the first signs of dawn. A look at the watch told him it was past six. Mind still foggy, he wandered through the apartment. It was all so unreal.

The front door wasn’t locked, meaning someone had left but both keys were hanging in the corridor. The second spot in the bed was tightly made. There was only one toothbrush. Everything that had belonged to Kaori was still here, but the odd stacks of writing material he had come accustomed to were gone. Nobody else lived here. He was alone.

Coming back to the bedroom, he noticed Yuuji standing in his cot, curiously looking up to him. Jin broke down in front of him and leaned his forehead against the bars. His head throbbed. So this was it. This would be his life from now on. He couldn’t even be sad. He just felt empty.

The following days washed by in an equally monotonous grey. His mind told him it was just like the instances when Kaori left to do who knows what. At night he lay awake, waiting to hear the apartment door open, muted steps, see light from the corridor, a sign that they had come back. Nothing happen. Every day started and ended with him alone in his bed. Despite Yuuji making a full recovery, he took some extra days off.

That was the thing. Yuuji was fine, happy, just as energetic as he had been before the incident. He still needed company in the bathroom and the door always had to be kept open, but aside from that he acted completely carefree, played with the same enthusiasm he had before. It made Jin feel even more like his feelings were inconsequential. He expected the boy to say something, show signs that there was someone missing. Even if he was apprehensive of them, didn't he notice that his mother was gone? They had spend so much time together, did he just forget? Jin felt like he was going insane for being the only one who saw a vacant space in his life.

Three days after they had disappeared, he heard the doorbell ring. It was late in the evening and he had just been sitting on the couch, Yuuji in his lap, and let the low volume of the TV distract him from his thoughts. Hesitantly, he got up, telling himself not to become hopeful but being unable to fully suppress the emotions. Muting the TV and leaving Yuuji tightly wrapped in a blanket on the sofa, he walked towards the front door.

His hands were almost too jittery to turn the handle. When he finally got the door open, he was met with empty air. Nobody was there. Jin frowned and looked around. Still nobody. He couldn't even hear steps in the stairwell. He was just about to put it up to his imagination playing tricks on him, showing that he was truly losing his mind, when he noticed an unassuming pot at his feet.

There was nothing outstanding about it, simply a wide steel jar with a lid, but he immediately recognized it for what it was. Before he knew what was happening, he found himself sagging to the ground, all strength having left his body. With trembling hands he reached out, took the pot and placed it on the wooden ground of the corridor. Distantly, he registered the door falling shut behind him. Turning the vessel around, he noticed some *kanji* crudely scratched into the surface:



Jin let out a sob. His vision was swimming with tears he couldn't suppress any longer. This was all that was left of her. All collected into a small urn, not bigger than a cooking pot. How could a fully grown human ever fit into such a small space. How could she ever be reduced to this.

Hands still shaking, he traced the lid. It was cold and hard. Just unfeeling metal under his fingers. He needed to see it - her. Needed to make sure that it was truly over. After a couple of failed attempts, the lid clattered to the floor. He edged forward, and risked a glance inside. It was dark, but it was a corporeal darkness. Ashes, human ashes.

His breathing sped up, coming out in short quick pants that did nothing to supplement his lungs with air. Against his better judgement, he stretched out a hand. Thousand years of mortuary customs screamed at him not to do it but he couldn't help it. He needed to know, force himself to confront reality.

After his hand had disappeared up to his wrist, he felt a sand-like coarseness against the tip of his fingers. Digging deeper, the odd splinter poked him. It was like burying his hand into the ground on an unkept beach. When lifting his hand back up, he could finally see her, what was left of her body. The colour was light brown with the odd white and grey fragments in it. Just like beach sand.

He let the content drop back into the urn except for a bigger bone splinter. It was slightly curved with one edge ending in an unnaturally straight line. A part of her skull, close to where it had been cut open before her death. Jin ran his thumb over the underside of it. Everything was so coarse. All edges and bumps and dry surface. Nothing like she or even they had been in life.

Looking closer at his hand, he noticed the fine dust of the ashes still sticking to his skin, like it wanted to soak into his body. Jin brought his hand closer to his face. There was no discernable smell. He could feel her, touch her, but she wasn't whole anymore. Her essence was gone.

His tongue ran over the palm of his hand. The taste of his own skin camouflaged it a little but there was another kind of sour, kind of salty aftertaste that didn't belong to him. He licked his hand again. And again. Until all the ash was gone and he was only holding the

bone splinter between his fingers. His lips twitched up into a wobbly smile. It wasn't much but he still felt somewhat consoled. She was here with him, inside him. Something of her, of them, would always stay with him.

Exhausted, he laid down on the floor, putting his glasses to the side and rubbing his eyes. Through his blurry vision, the skull piece in his hand looked a lot softer. More like it should be. For a long time he just laid there, thinking of nothing at all and turning the leftover of her body in his hand. The sour tang still coated the inside of his mouth.

He shot up. What had he done. He had eaten part of her body. Took part of her away. It would stay inside him for a while but eventually his body would digest her's, pulling any substance it found from her and then shat her out. He buried his face in his hands, feeling sick. What was wrong with him? Even in death he couldn't stop ruining her. Destroying the little remains he had left. In death as in life.

The dam that had kept his emotions at bay the last days fully broke.

It was all his fault. Everything he touched turned to shit. He couldn't protect Kaori from the car crash. The only person who could have filled the space she had occupied, left him. He had alienated his father. He had let his son be abused.

If only he had pulled her away from the car in time. If he had engaged with them more, seen them as their own person. If he had listened, asked them questions earlier about what they were doing. If he had been there during the experiment, he could have prevented the boy from suffering. He could have salvaged the relationship between his wife and his son. He could have kept his family from breaking apart.

Everything he had ever wanted had been in his grasp and he had squandered it. A child had been Kaori's wish as much as his. Without her - them - all this was meaningless. His wish had not only ruined his life but that of his whole family. He didn't deserve to be a father. He didn't deserve Yuuji. All he brought the child was pain. How could he ever make up for all the wrong he had done. He had doomed the boy and the only thing he could do now is make the wreckage of his life more comfortable to live in.

Jin curled into himself and pressed the skull shard against his forehead. It fit so perfectly against him. Everything had fit perfectly together. Now all that was left was ashes.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone is going through it this chapter. Even Kenjaku has to sleep on the couch.

So, little explanation. Given Yuuji's complicated feelings around his parents, the fact that he doesn't remember his mother and just the way the first (present-time) meeting of Yuuji and Kenjaku went, I am sure that they did something to him when he was a child. It has been hinted at that Sukuna underwent sokushinbutsu before dying. The traditional method involves drinking Urushi tea, which would make Sukuna's flesh poisonous even if you ignore his cursed energy. So that is where I got the idea for Kenjaku's experiment.

hahaue - "honorable mother" old formal way of addressing your mother; otaa-sama/otata-sama means basically the same but it sounds even more stiff and was used by children of (Heian) court nobles.

Kenjaku's goodnight story is again part of the Torikaebaya Monogatari. Just thought that particular scene too fitting not to include it.

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Notes

Hey! I'm still alive and really sorry it took so long to update. I thought I would just make one long chapter of like 30k words to end it off, but that would have taken just too long and I don't want you to have to wait more than a year....

Thank you so much for all the positive feedback, the comments and kudos and bookmarks and other messages I got, it really means a lot to me and motivated me to continue writing even if I was struggling with and worrying about portraying Jin's mental state. This is something like an 18k "interlude" before the big finale to all this. Thank you again so much for sticking with this story for so long and I hope you will continue to like where it goes

Now back to Jin's misery...

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It had been a while since they last came by, about a month. He hadn't been able to see his grandson for his half year anniversary and now he was already passing the seven month mark. As much as he hated interacting with that detestable person, he missed seeing the boy. His stay always resulted in a lot of chaos but it was a welcome distraction. It brought some life into this otherwise dreary house. The toddler perfectly combined the best aspects of both Jin and Kaori. A reminder of better, simpler times.

A short ring of the doorbell forced him to get up early in the morning, despite only having gotten a few hours of rest after his nightshift. Sleep still in his eyes and naked feet dragging over the wooden floorboards, he padded to the front door. The sight he encountered upon opening it rooted him to the spot, barely able to process what he was seeing. It was Yuuji. Just like the usual visits, he was held up with one arm, while a bag of baby food and diapers was standing by the side. However, today he was not accompanied by that fraud of a woman with her sneer and cold eyes. The sudden reunion with his son left him shell-shocked, his tired mind not accepting the emotional load threatening to overwhelm him.

They could have at least warned him beforehand. Give him a call so he could mentally prepare for this encounter. It was too damn early and Wasuke was getting too old for these kinds of surprises. So many

months had he dreaded reaching out to him, told himself he would stay true to his word and cut ties. Now Jin was the one who had come back. Why, after more than half a year. To amend wrongs? Try to rebuild burned bridges? Did something happen or was that woman using him again?

Jin looked terrible. He had clearly lost weight. There were deep circles under his eyes, his lips bruised from having been excessively bitten, and his posture appeared more slumped than he remembered. What had that imposter done to him?

“Hey,” his son greeted in a hollow voice, avoiding eye contact. “I’m sorry to spring this on you, but I need you to watch Yuuji for the day.” He hesitated. “Every weekday actually if possible.”

Wasuke forced himself out of his daze and muttered, “What happened to your worse half?” He was glad that the question came out firm, cloaked in his usual gruff tone, not betraying all the convoluted emotions he was currently going through.

The younger man flinched a little, looking to the side. “They left,” he mumbled.

His son’s answer had been so quiet that Wasuke didn’t quite believe his ears. However, the change in pronouns didn’t escape him. Maybe a way for Jin to distance himself or to finally differentiate between Kaori and that doppelgänger.

“What do you mean... Are they gone? For good?” He couldn’t help the rising elation mixing into his voice.

Jin took a deep breath and rubbed his forehead to relieve some tension in his body. “I will explain in the evening. Actually, I would appreciate it if you could come back home with me later. There is something I have to show you.”

That sounded foreboding. The dark tone of Jin’s voice marginally dampened his joy. He gave his son’s miserable form a onceover and then shifted his attention to his grandson. In contrast to his father, he looked perfectly happy and healthy. With big curious eyes he was watching the exchange between the adults. Noticing his gaze, the toddler waved at the old man. He smiled back.

“Okay, I can take him. We will have to see about the rest of the week but today is no problem and tomorrow my shift starts in the evening.”

His son knelt down and lowered the boy to the ground. Wasuke watched with amazement as the child not only kept standing but padded over to him. The movement still looked a bit uncoordinated but he wasn't stumbling.

"Thank you." Jin met his eyes for the first time. A well of grief and pain opened up to him, pulling him inside and making Wasuke's heart ache. What he found underneath was even worse. There was an emptiness he had never seen in him before. Not even when he was struggling with Kaori's death and sudden resurrection. Back when they had still been unsure of what to make of the imposter that had turned up in the hospital.

He wanted to say something, his hand twitching in an involuntary need to comfort the other, but before he could find the right words, Jin continued, "You don't have to feed Yuuji anymore, he eats on his own. Just give him a small spoon or let him use his hands." He hesitated. "Also, I'm not sure how a different environment might change things, but he doesn't like it if you close the bathroom door on him, even if you are in the room too."

Yuuji had already moved past his grandfather and was currently searching for entertainment inside the house. Wasuke looked after him, marvelling again at his growth, and then raised an eyebrow at the visitor. "Why is that?"

Jin's stare was oddly blank. "I don't know. Just a quirk he developed." The old man frowned. His son broke eye contact again. "I have to go. We can talk in the evening. See you then."

He gave him a scrutinising look but it was clear that he wouldn't get any answers right now. "Okay. See you in the evening." The man nodded and then turned around and left. Wasuke looked after him until Jin's car had driven off.

Something definitely had happened. Something more severe than just Kaori's bad copy walking out on his son. Regret crept up on him once more. He should have checked up on them earlier. At least get visual confirmation that his son was physically and mentally okay. How long had he looked like this? Was it caused by Kaori's disappearance or had he been spiralling for longer? The old man rubbed a hand over his face in agitation. How naive he had been. His own pride and the apparent happiness of the little boy had made him careless.

He leaned against the shut entrance door. The good news was, the

imposter was gone. Whatever damage they had brought to Jin's psyche could be repaired. Now his son had finally a chance to heal, to grief. It would be hard for him, but he would survive, brave the depression that was threatening to drown him. Wasuke knew the feeling all too well from the first years after his wife's death. A situation not unlike Jin's, now that he thought about it. Their son had been older than Yuuji was now, but his mother had still been ripped out of their lives quite suddenly. Unlike Wasuke though, Jin would have support while raising his own child. His father would make sure of that. For Yuuji's sake if nothing else.

Cluttering of metal tore him away from his thoughts. Following the sound led him into the kitchen where he found the toddler sitting on the floor, pulling pots out of the cabinet and trying to stack them on top of each other like toy blocks. Chuckling to himself, he knelt down next to the child and helped him get the rest of the kitchen ware out. They spend a good while sitting on the floor with Wasuke showing his grandson how best to arrange the pods to get a high tower.

Soon, Jin's bleak reappearance was banished to the back of the man's mind. He really had missed the little rascal. The boy just possessed a talent for making him forget the darker parts of his life. Needing to be constantly looked after so he didn't destroy any furniture certainly kept Wasuke too busy to linger on those thoughts. Yuuji being able to eat on his own brought its own new challenges. It forced him to choose between the kid unintentionally throwing food everywhere with a spoon or smearing it on the table and himself when using his hands. To keep the cleaning to a limited area, he opted for the latter.

Later, as he put Yuuji on his potty-chair and moved to close the bathroom door out of sheer habit, he did notice that the boy got a little agitated, shifting in his seat and nervously scanning the room. Leaving the door visibly open quickly calmed the child down again. It was strange, but it might just be the equivalent of monsters under the bed. Even adults had weird quirks about peeing and it wasn't like Yuuji was crying or throwing a tantrum. For now it might be best to just keep an eye on that behaviour and see how it developed.

His son's response had been odd, but so was everything about him at the moment. Wasuke couldn't think of a reason why going to the toilet of all things would be affected by whatever actions the imposter might have taken. Nonetheless, he felt reassured when he saw that Yuuji reacted normal to touch, and a subtle check while changing diapers revealed no marks on his body. Aside from that oddity, Yuuji was perfectly healthy, healthier than any other child his age. It would

probably go away by itself. Whatever it was that was bothering him, he was sure to forget it when he grew older.

When Jin showed up on his doorstep again, it felt too early since the meeting in the morning. It wasn't like he didn't want to see him, but looking at the man was like having all his failings presented to him on a silver platter, clear and impossible to miss. Exhaustion from work had not improved his complexion, although he did manage a weak smile when a tired Yuuji fell into his arms once more.

The drive to Jin's apartment was tense. Wasuke didn't even bother with trying to ask about his day, he already got all the answers he needed from the man's expression. Instead, he stared pensively out of the window, watching the city lights flicker by while the other for his part stayed entirely concentrated on the street. Only muffled pop songs from the radio filled the silence between them.

At the apartment, Wasuke held a half-asleep Yuuji in his arms as he watched his son fumble with the keys. He seemed more jittery than during the car ride. After he finally managed to open the door, he took the toddler from his arms and instructed his father to wait in the living room while he put the boy to bed.

Wasuke was not sure what he had expected, but the flat did not look much different from before. There were of course toys scattered around and the patchwork blanket on the living room floor was new, but nothing unusual. A quick glance into the kitchen revealed a lot of instant ramen packages in the trash, a clear contrast to Yuuji's diligently prepared food. He could hardly fault the newly single father for not having the time to cook for himself.

Back in the living room, he noticed a pile of photographs strewn about on the table as he sat down on the couch. Curiously, he shuffled through them. Most of the photos showed Yuuji. Some had dates written on the back in Jin's handwriting, but most were not categorised yet. Jin was often pictured too. Usually together with Yuuji, although occasionally also alone, reading or cooking or walking by the riverside. It struck him how happy he looked. There was always this tension when he visited Wasuke, a tension that was completely missing here.

It was to be expected, he presumed, this was during a time when Jin had basically everything he ever wanted. Well, he had the child he



always wanted, the experience of being a father. Wasuke had thought his son's dream had also included his actual partner but it seemed the imposter had done a good enough job to keep Jin content. Until recently.

Speaking of, said person was notably missing from the photos. There was an odd leg or arm indicating their presence, not to mention that some of the photos must have been taken by them but the face of the culprit themselves was missing. They might not have wanted to leave any evidence behind of what happened to Kaori.

His son kept him from further lingering on those musings as he entered the room and loudly cleared his throat. He dropped the photos and looked up. Jin was holding a silver pot in his slightly shaking hands. Hesitantly, he placed it in front of Wasuke on the table.

"I thought you might want to see this... her," he whispered, eyes cast down.

Wasuke frowned, then a cold force seized his heart. He looked from the pot - urn he now realised - to his son. When Jin said the imposter had left, he had assumed that meant they had taken Kaori's body with them. It was unfortunate, but he had long given up on retrieving it, bringing her back to how she had once been, even if it was just her corpse. Her body had been dragged around for so long, he hadn't really considered the possibility of that person voluntarily leaving her behind. Them disappearing while still wearing the guise of Kaori had been the best-case-scenario he could have come up with. It was all acceptable as long as it kept Jin and Yuuji away from their influence so he could start on rebuilding what was left.

Feeling just as weak as his son now, he reached out to the urn. Distantly, he noted Jin pulling a chair over and sitting down, hands tangled together in his lap. The steel was cool and felt far too foreign to his touch. Not the kind of design he would have chosen. When turning it around, he found scratches on the surface. First, he wanted to scold the other man for being so careless with the ashes of the dead, then he recognized the marks as kanjis spelling her name: Itadori Kaori.

He wet his lips, taking a few calming breaths before speaking quietly, "So this is it. She is finally free." Jin didn't say anything, just stared at the silver vessel. "Since you are officially married, I can arrange for her to be buried in our family grave."

The man discreetly rubbed his nose. "Thank you."

Wasuke felt a pang of sympathy. This was the final evidence that the woman his son had loved since he was a teenager was truly dead, there was no denying it. And he never even got the chance to say goodbye or truly acknowledge that she was gone, before now.

"We could bury the ring with her," he suggested. "You never actually got the chance to give it to her but this way it will at least be with her in death."

The memory of the jewellery had been tainted by what that person and Jin had done, but this could be a way to make amends. To give Kaori what had originally been intended for her. Jin raised his head, meeting his father's empathetic gaze. An array of emotions Wasuke could not quite discern ran over the man's features, each gone too fast to really pin down. Eyes wide, he stared at him unseeing.

Slowly, his mouth opened to eventually utter, "I don't have it."

The words dropping from the other's lips did not make any sense. Speechless, he let a few moments pass by but Jin did not elaborate, just kept vacantly staring at him. The evening shadows deepened the discolouration around his eyes, making the white inside stand out even more. Wasuke wished he would look away.

"What do you mean, you don't have it?" he asked, his voice taking on a foreboding tone as a thought crossed his mind.

For a while Jin seemed lost for words, then he mumbled, "It is not here and it is not in the ashes." The corners of his mouth twitched up, his expression softened. Wasuke knew what that meant and he didn't like it.

"Are you sure? It could just be in the back of some drawer or burned up."

The other man nodded, gaze wandering around the room. "I thoroughly looked through the whole apartment yesterday for unrelated reasons. It is not here. No, they wouldn't just leave it lying around in a dark corner. They would give it back or leave it somewhere obvious where I would surely find it. To make a point. Which means..." A hopeful smile played on his lips.

This was not good. He couldn't let Jin fall back into old traps now that he had an actual chance of escaping them. Wasuke got up and harshly

clasped his son's shoulders, forcing him to focus on the present.

"Don't even think about it, Jin. Even if it's still with them, that doesn't mean anything. They left you, remember? If they do care about it, they would only use it for manipulation. Just let it go. We can bury Kaori without it." Reluctantly, the young man looked up at him, silently taking in his words. With a sigh, Wasuke added, "Just be glad that this nightmare is finally over and move on. It's the best thing you can do at the moment."

Jin frowned. "They might have left for now, but they aren't gone. They are still keeping an eye on Yuuji, and they promised me we would meet again."

Wasuke's brows shot up. So he was right. With renewed vigour he answered, "But that is worse. You have to take this chance and try to pull away from them. That person doesn't even look like Kaori anymore. You realise that, right?" He pointed towards the urn. "That is all that's left of Kaori. The person out there now is completely different. There is nothing left of her. Just accept it."

The other man's expression hardened. "I know. Believe me, I am well aware of the state Kaori's body is in. This is not about her...not really."

Taken aback, his hands fell from his son's shoulders. "What do you mean?" he asked, slowly.

Jin's gaze became defiant. "You don't know anything about what kind of relationship I have with them, so don't try to tell me what to do." He stood up, reminding his father that he was actually a few centimetres taller than him. "And why do you think you can give me advice on how to grief or how to move on, when you aren't doing it yourself."

"What?" he bit out.

His son stabbed a finger at his chest. "You haven't had a partner or even a close friendship since mom died, over 20 years ago."

"You can move on with your life without getting into a new relationship," he glowered.

"You hole yourself up in a Pachinko parlour any time you get overwhelmed. At least I don't gamble my money away. You are too invested in my relationship with Kaori. It's like you want to relive

your life with mom through us. But I am not you and she is not mom. You process your grief by latching onto me, Kaori, and the thrill of flashing money-eating machines. How is that any better than what I am doing?" Jin relentlessly continued.

Wasuke was stunned into silence. Had Jin always felt this way or had that person told him to say this? No, this seemed to be something he had bottled up for a long time. The comments about the gambling did put a queasy feeling in his gut. Admittedly, in the early years, there had been far too many evenings when he had left Jin alone at home to go out. Looking back on it, it definitely hadn't been a time he was very proud of. However, that was in the past and he had gotten a hold on his bad habits, only indulging in moderation. He had the right to let himself have a good time once in a while. There was nobody to neglect anymore, aside from himself.

The accusations regarding Jin and Kaori's relationship were ridiculous. Where did he even get that impression? The two had obviously been happy together, he had just wanted to preserve this happiness for the sake of his son. They had a good thing and while Kaori might be dead, Jin was in the process of throwing away everything they had built. If Jin met another nice woman down the line and wanted to start a new relationship with her, that was totally fine with him. It was just this one person. Why was Jin so attached to them, even now?

"I admit and have admitted before, I have my vices, but that is not comparable to continuing to run after...them. We don't even know who or what they are. Especially now that they don't have Kaori's body anymore. This isn't just some rebound fling. You are endangering all of us, including Yuuji."

At the boy's name, Jin faltered a little but nonetheless he retorted, "We had our problems and disagreements, I don't deny that. Still, I enjoyed their presence. Them having Kaori's appearance helped, but that wasn't all. No matter what you think, we were a family - are a family. Therefore, I would say I have a bit more insight than you into what kind of person they are. They would never kill Yuuji. Or me."

Sickness coursed through him. The words were like a punch in the gut. He glanced back to the photos on the table. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he muttered, "So this is how low you put the bar? Murder? Not wanting to kill an infant is enough for you to think of them as a good person?" Jin had started to bite on his lip again, but he wasn't avoiding Wasuke's eyes. "They did something to Yuuji,

didn't they?" A flinch. So it was true. He couldn't even be surprised. "And still you are defending them, want to go back to them. Are you that selfish?"

Jin crossed his arms. "No, that was wrong, I agree. We talked about it and it will not happen again. I will make sure they treat him better in the future."

While he had thankfully only been in healthy relationships in his life, he recognized those phrases, knew where they came from. He was torn between pity and disgust at his son. It was in a way understandable why he felt this way, especially if he did actually have a mostly positive experience with that person in the last months, but where a child's wellbeing was concerned, he couldn't master to hold onto those excuses.

"I think you should leave now," Jin said with finality.

Wasuke grunted. "Yes, I think so too." He turned back to the urn. "You will have to give me the cremation documents at some point so I can arrange the burial. That urn doesn't look very nice but it will have to do. You really could have put more care into the preservation of her remains. You owe it to her." His son didn't answer but he did look a bit conscious-stricken. "I will try to arrange my schedule so I can take care of Yuuji on weekdays." He glanced back at Jin. "The less time he spends with you the better."

The young man's shoulders fell and he lowered his gaze but didn't protest or tried to justify himself. Wasuke had thought he could help his son, thought they shared similar experiences, but he understood now that he was dealing with something completely different. His son wasn't only grieving for his dead wife but also running after a doomed relationship, with the latter being at the forefront of his mind at the moment. As long as Jin didn't recognize the problem, there was nothing he could do for him. Even though he needed help, Wasuke decided that ensuring Yuuji's safety was more important.

It seemed there really was no hope. Without another word, he brushed past his son. Being in this home was suffocating. He had to clear his head.

Jin was lying on the bed on top of his covers, faintly smiling at the two photographs in his hand. Yuuji was already sound asleep in his cot and the urn was standing on Kaori's bedside table as always. As upsetting as the confrontation with his father had been, it had also given him hope. Assurance that this really was not the end and they would come back. Evidence that they must have an emotional attachment to their family, even if they tried to hide it. There was a possibility that he could fix things, that his family could be brought back together one way or another.

Looking through the old photographs of their time together had been a painful reminder of what he had lost, but also brought some delightful revelations with it. There were photos he before had no idea existed, clearly taken by them. Most of them showed Yuuji and him playing or sleeping together. He had noticed that these photos had been taken in half-month to month-long intervals, however there was no reason why this could not be made out of sentimentality as well as a documentation of Yuuji's growth. No matter the reasons, it was sweet of them to want to hold onto these moments.

Over the past half year he had made numerous attempts at getting all three of them in front of the camera, but his wife had continuously refused. It was nice to see at least some of these attempts had succeeded. While most were too blurry or shaky to make out any details, the two pictures in his hand right now came out perfectly focused. The first showed Kaori sitting on the sofa, feet up on the living room table, with Yuuji in their lap. A picture book was propped up on their thighs and they were in the process of explaining something to their son.

He remembered that moment well. Yuuji had been very taken in by a bee flying over a wide field of flowers, prompting a long-winded explanation about the intricacies of the ecosystem and the important role bees played in it. How they were in some ways the cornerstone of human existence. Jin had sat in the corner, quietly laughing about the out-of-place zoology lesson.

In the photo their face was mostly hidden by a black curtain of hair, only revealing their mouth. Maybe that was the reason why they hadn't complained at that time. If their eyes and scar had been visible, the difference to her would have been obvious. This way, the identity was left ambiguous. Jin personally would not have minded, he had already resolved to explain the circumstances of his conception to Yuuji when the time came. However, thanks to this ambiguity Kaori would also be included in a family picture at least once.

The other photograph had been a lucky shot he had taken of both of them together. Holding up the camera to face him, he had quickly slid over to them and taken a photo. Only their head and left shoulder were visible in the corner, but at least the focus was sharp. They were looking over to his bright smile with a slightly exasperated but still clearly amused expression. The only image he had of their face. He stroked his thumb along their forehead scar and cheek, wishing he had their reassuring presence next to him again. Someone who could tell him how he was supposed to raise a child all on his own and be a good influence for him on top of it. His gaze naturally fell to the vacant space on the bed next to him. He did not think he would ever be able to get used to the seemingly vast emptiness that surrounded him now. No additional warmth at his back, no comforting presence, no arm that would snake around his waist in the middle of the night.

He shook himself out of his spiralling thoughts and concentrated on the bright faces in the picture. As much as he wanted to keep the photos for himself, they were really intended for Yuuji. He might not remember his first years - for better or for worse - but this way he would always have evidence of the love and affection his parents held for him. By the time of his first birthday, he wanted to have the photo album ready. Over the coming years, he, his father or Yuuji himself could then expand on it with new memories. He smiled to himself and put the pictures on his nightstand.

The new system worked fairly well, despite some hiccups in the beginning. Jin brought Yuuji to his grandfather in the morning and welcomed him back in the evening. On the weekend it was still just the two of them. Yuuji didn't seem to mind spending more time with his grandfather. He loved running around the big house. Every once in a while some twinges of jealousy reared their head when Jin saw how his son sometimes seemed very reluctant to leave, but he told himself that this was a good thing. His father was right. He wasn't a good influence for the boy. There was this persistent anxiety in the back of his mind that he would mess up, that Yuuji would get hurt again because of his carelessness, that he would bring back bad memories for the boy, who clearly tried to leave what happened behind.

They wanted him to raise the boy, but his life was hardly a model to emulate. Yes, his father had his faults too, but with Yuuji he was

different. More attentive and nurturing. Since their disappearance Jin had involuntarily distanced himself from his son, too caught up in his many problems. The boy felt it. He might be young, but he understood. There was the simple fact that his parents had hurt him and his grandfather had not. That fundamental trust Yuuji used to have had suffered and Jin became less and less optimistic it could ever be completely regained.

Over the course of the week, Jin had pulled out that scrunched-up paper with the phone number many times, but never built up the courage to dial it. Too early in the morning, surely nobody would respond at a time like this. Too late, nobody would be available in the evening. That left the weekend. Maybe they weren't free on the weekend. No, it didn't matter. He couldn't run away forever. He had to call the number eventually. He needed their help.

On a Saturday noon, he stood in the hallway of his apartment, receiver pressed against his ear, hands sweaty. With trembling fingers, he dialled. After the second ring he already wanted to cancel the call, but he forced himself to hold on. It felt like he stood there for hours, waiting for someone to take pity on him. What if these people thought his requests were ridiculous? What kind of people was he dealing with here anyway? Hopefully it wasn't Uraume. Jin had not seen the monk again, but it just so happened that he found a bundle of self-made baby food by his door every few weeks. If they had instructed them to do that or if the cook had taken the initiative themselves, he did not know. They had shown considerable interest in Yuuji - more so than his mother in certain regards.

He suddenly heard a click. Someone had answered.

*"Who is it?"* a man's voice drawled into his ear.

"Uhm, hello. My name is Itadori Jin. I have been told to call this number if I need help." His mouth was too dry.

*"Itadori...Jin?"* There was some shuffling on the other side. *"Ah, you're the father. What's the problem?"*

So they knew who he was. Some of the weight on his shoulders lifted. While he was a bit disappointed to not be 'the husband', there was still acknowledgement of a familial connection, even if it related more to Yuuji. Being referred to as 'the father' gave him some confidence, but also once again reminded him that he had a role to fulfil and they



were putting a lot of stock into him doing a good job.

“I want to bury Itadori Kaori and to do that I need to give the temple some sort of document showing where she was cremated.” He paused for a moment. “And I need a death certificate for the city hall, to report her passing.” So much paperwork. Not as bad as when Kaori unexpectedly revived, but not something he looked forward to either.

*“That’s the birthing body, right? I have the death certificate here. I can send you a few copies. Was actually supposed to do that a while ago. Sorry about that. It’s a bit busy at the moment. I’m sure we can make some sort of report for the incineration too. I’ll send it to you on Monday.”*

Jin breathed a sigh of relief. If they handled the papers and he just had to deliver them to the appropriate authorities, that made things a lot easier. “Thank you. My address is-”

*“No need,”* the man interrupted him. *“I already have it.”*

A queasy feeling pulled in his stomach. It made sense he supposed, they had lived here for over a year after all and if this man worked for them, he would likely be aware of that. Besides, everyone could look him up in a phonebook. Nonetheless, a stranger just having his address readily available didn’t sit right with him.

“I see.” He licked his lips. It was probably pointless to ask his next question, but he just had to try. “Can you put me in contact with them?”

Hopefully, the other understood who he was talking about. Jin didn’t know how else to address them, he never even asked for their name, just stubbornly stuck to ‘Kaori’. They had both failed to be open with each other in this relationship.

The man sighed. *“No. There’s a lot to do right now and I’m only supposed to put your call through if it’s an emergency, like the vessel being in danger. This doesn’t sound like an emergency.”*

Jin felt his ears heat up and clasped the receiver tighter. Not only was there the embarrassment of being referred to as an unnecessary distraction, but the way this man talked about Yuuji grated on his nerves. For them to dehumanise Yuuji like this was one thing, they were his mother and had shown that they cared about their child in their own way, but this man had no idea who he was talking about. Was he even aware that he was saying this about a child? What gave him the right to refer to Yuuji as a mere object?

“No, Yuuji is doing fine,” he said stiffly, emphasising the boy’s name.

*“Right, great. Sorry, but they don’t have the time for social calls at the moment. Can’t imagine you would want to pay for a call to Slovakia either,”* the other retorted, seemingly unbothered by Jin’s tone.

His anger momentarily vanished, as he processed the new information. “Slovakia?” he echoed, disbelieving. An affirmative hum came from the other side. “What are they doing in Slovakia?”

He only had a very vague understanding of Eastern Europe. Or Europe as a whole. It was somewhere near Russia that much he knew but that was pretty much it. There had been something in the news recently about the country’s involvement with NATO but he hadn’t really paid attention.

*“If you don’t already know that, then I don’t think I’m supposed to tell you.”*

Jin was liking this man less and less. The guy’s judgement was obvious even through the phone. He probably saw Jin as some discarded fling whining about when his lover would return. As if he knew anything about their relationship. They had a child together. Was it not understandable to want to keep in touch?

“Do you know when they will be coming back?” he asked.

*“That depends on how successful their endeavour is. If they find it, they might be back in a month or two. If not, they will probably want to scout the nearby countries. In that case it could take half a year or more until they’re back in Japan.”*

So they were searching for something. He didn’t have the best understanding of their plan and goals even with the new information they had imparted on him. Did it have to do with Yuuji? Would they have told him if it concerned their son? As much as he liked to think so, he wasn’t sure.

“I see. Thank you. I will not bother you further then.”

*“Sure. The documents should arrive on Monday or Tuesday, depending on how fast the postal service works. Call again if there are any problems.”*  
Jin did not miss the way he stressed ‘problems’. Asking for information about his wife clearly didn’t count as one.

That at least took care of the bureaucracy. There was nothing

preventing Kaori's funeral anymore. His heart ached at the thought but he did not feel as devastated as he used to even a week ago. He had assurance that they still held onto a memento of his, and he had evidence that this hadn't just all been a delusion. They had connections. They were still out there. Out in the world, despite not possessing Kaori's body anymore. And eventually they would return. Hopefully not just to Japan but their family as well.

With a heavy heart Jin clasped the urn in his lap tighter. He was sitting on a bench in front of the temple gates, a small bouquet of flowers lying next to him and Yuuji playing in the dirt of the lawn. This was the final time he would get to see and hold Kaori. In less than an hour she would be hidden away beneath stone, only shortly uncovered in the future when the next family member joined her.

Slowly, he unscrewed the lid and looked inside. The daylight gave her a whole new look, making the bones appear gentler, not as meagre and cold. Her colours seemed more vibrant, the brown and grey of the ashes reminding him less of sickness and death. It would be her last chance to experience the sun. He didn't believe in her spirit lingering with her remains, but maybe this feeling of the light bleaching her bones would still reach her.

With no hesitation he lowered his hand into the urn and grabbed a handful. Uncurling his fingers, he exposed her body to the outside world for the first time in what must be months, or ever depending on how they had cremated her. The documents said it happened in Zao but he guessed that those people just picked a random city in Miyagi. Brain haemorrhage had been put down as the cause of death. Quite ironic and probably their attempt at humour.

Gently, he brushed his thumb over the bone splinters on his hand. By now he was able to differentiate them quite well. There were parts of a rib, small phalanges, teeth and skull shards. Their texture didn't feel quite as raw to him anymore. The way they rubbed against his skin was comforting. Nothing like Kaori, but he had accepted that. It wasn't the first physical change she had gone through. While he had not been tempted again to taste her, running her ashes through his fingers had become a comforting ritual. It made it easier somehow. He couldn't hold her anymore like he used to, but he could still touch

her.

She was dead now, for good, but there would always be something left of her. Be it the dusty remains of her body or the memories he and they still kept. A light smile on his lips, he pushed parts of her skull around on his hand, trying to find an edge that indicated the place where they had opened her up. Those straight lines, roughed up from an electric saw, were the perfect place where she and they blended together.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Reluctantly, he looked up. His father was standing on the sandy path that led to the temple, deep creases forming on his face as always. Shock, anger, disgust, disbelief. Thanks to paper work and scheduling issues it had already been a month since he had invited his father into his home, but his attitude had not changed. Of course he did not understand. Nonetheless, this was his way of grieving and his father had no right to intrude on it.

Yuuji let out a squeak and waddled over to his grandfather, oblivious to the tension in the air.

“I am saying goodbye,” Jin retorted evenly. Carefully, he lowered Kaori’s bones back into the urn, dusting off the ashes from his hands. He still kept the lid open, he wasn’t quite ready yet.

The old man grit his teeth. “Touching the dead with your bare hands, tainting her as well as yourself. Have you lost all respect together with your mind? Do you ever think about what you’re doing to the world around you? Do you ever think of anything other than yourself?”

Jin stared into the depths of the urn. Kaori’s pale bones shone back up at him. If only his father knew what else he had done to her. Compared to all the things that had happened, to all the things he had inflicted on her ever since she entered that hospital, this was nothing. If anything it was repentance for his past actions, finally seeing her for who she really was. A lot of things had gotten mixed up. He had been blind and intentionally skewed his vision of the truth, but seeing her body like this left him no other choice but to accept reality.

Kaori died in Sugisawa hospital, all that remained of her were memories and her physical form. Someone else had taken her place and with the help of her modified body gave him the child he always wanted, a child that was both his and Kaori’s, but also theirs. The one he had lived together with for more than a year, the one he had raised

Yuuji with to a certain point had not been Kaori. Her body had been used to hurt the child she and them were both the mother of. Despite appearances, she had had no input on their family life. Her name was on the papers, but he did not marry her.

When he now touched her bones, he knew for certain that it was her, the brain that had taken the place of hers having moved on. In a way, it was the least he could do now, to say farewell to her and touch her - only her - one last time before laying her to rest once and for all and concentrating on the part of his family that was still alive, if divided.

“Are you even listening to me?”

Harsh words disrupted his thoughts, but could ultimately do little to rile him up. He wouldn't let his father keep him from making his peace with Kaori's death. In his own way.

Lovingly, he ran his fingers over the steel outside of the urn, tilting it a little to get one last look at the ashes. It was kind of mesmerising how the light unveiled new depths underneath the shadows in the vessel and laid all of her bare. With a frail smile he took a deep breath and closed the lid over Kaori's remains. There was still the faint rustling of ashes coming from inside. Soon that too would be gone.

Gathering himself, he stood up and looked at the old man. “Should we go inside?”

Yuuji was playfully pulling on his grandfather's pants, fascinated by the way the fabric creased under his tight fists. The man absentmindedly patted his head to calm him down, but that didn't keep him from directing his fiery gaze at Jin.

“That's all you have to say? Act as if this is normal? As if nothing happened? You're lucky none of the temple staff saw you,” he spat.

Jin kept his expression even. “I know this is not normal, that is the point. Kaori's death was not normal. My relationship with her was not normal. So why not break tradition for her burial as well. I think what I am doing is entirely appropriate after what she went through and the only way I can still show her my affection, one last time.”

The other man frowned, expression wavering, then he tutted. “I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you think this way. Defiling dead bodies just like that psychopath you're running after.”

He really was angry about this. His relationship to his father had

always been on uneven ground, too much in the past that just wouldn't stay buried, but this whole incident with Kaori had shown clearly how different they really were.

Him being similar to them? In some aspects surely, but that entirely neglected their important differences. Of course, his father wouldn't know about that, he hadn't been there after all. Their differences were what had made them such an effective couple, each one lacked something the other had. It just so happened that there was one wrong Jin hadn't been able to amend. One big mistake that would require hard work to move past. If he could just manage to connect with them again, bring them back so they could make up for what they had done to Yuuji. Or at least let him play the mediator if Yuuji did not want to stay around them. He didn't want his son's one haunting memory of his mother to be the experiment in the bathroom.

However, that was a task for another time. This was about Kaori. "You really don't understand." He glanced at the temple entrance. "Anyway, should we get this over with? You can keep an eye on Yuuji, while I turn Kaori's ashes over to them."

The old man glowered at him, but then bent down to take the boy into his arms and walk with long steps towards their destination. Jin picked up the flowers and followed close behind.

After handing over Kaori's ashes to the temple staff, they had to wait in the entrance hall for about ten minutes until the grave had been opened and a monk was available to assist in the burial. The time passed by agonisingly slowly. Jin kept to himself in one corner, absentmindedly leafing through the flowers in his hands, while his father stayed on the other side of the room, aggressively reading one of the flyers displayed there. Yuuji was stumbling around the hall, inspecting all the intricate wooden carvings of the furniture and decorations.

When a monk finally showed up to save them from the awkward family gathering, they were led outside to a graveyard about 100 metres away from the main building. The Itadori family grave was located towards the back, the gravestone small and relatively unassuming. Newer, neatly kept dark gravestones cornered it from either side. The other graves were of polished marble, making theirs with its cracks and weather marks look frail in comparison. Age had taken a number on it. However, his father's hard work in upkeep was

clearly noticeable, as there were no grass stains or moss growing on it. Jin tried to do his part as well, but he rarely got the time to visit his mother.

He had always been a bit apprehensive about coming here. The memories of his mother were very dear to him and he cherished them immensely, but facing her grave had often felt like too harsh of a reminder of what he had lost. Especially, during the times shortly after her death, when his father had distanced himself to not show his grief openly, the cemetery would feel like a punch in the gut that mercilessly told him that he would never get back what he had lost. Instead, Jin had tried to cling to the living and once he started working, he just could not make it more than twice a year to her grave even after having come to terms with her passing. He promised himself to not fall into the same bad habits with Kaori.

Watching the urn get placed into the hollow space underneath the gravestone, he found himself unexpectedly calm. It seemed like he really had accepted the fact that their time together had come to an end. Seeing her next to the old, brittle vessels of his mother and grandparents also gave him the comforting knowledge that she would be in good hands. She would not be alone. Being among his relatives despite everything was the best he could have given her considering the circumstances, he thought. It was not her he married, it was not her he had a child with, but she was still an important part of his family and her burial symbolised that. He would not be where he was today without her.

Looking up, he saw Yuuji in his father's arms, peeking over his shoulder and grabbing after a butterfly, completely unaffected by the sombre mood and the fact that his biological mother was being placed into a space unreachable for him until he too might someday die. It was an uplifting innocence that reminded Jin why he was glad to be here. Two years ago, he would have likely been so devastated, that he would have wanted to crawl into the earth with her, but he had more than her now, other people he had to stay alive for. He had their son to take care of and a relationship to amend. Would Kaori be proud to see him like this? He doubted she would want him to waste away after her and end up like his father, but what about his other plans for his life? His feelings for the person that had taken her place and his attempts at raising their child? Jin was not certain what answer she might have given him. Images of previously long forgotten nightmares, of her frightened blood-shot eyes looking up at him, reared their heads.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he shook the thoughts away and solely concentrated on watching Kaori disappear beneath the heavy stone plates. Quietly, he reiterated his promise to visit her and meticulously clean the grave to show that he would not forget about her, no matter where his life would take him and also to make up for his previous neglect. Maybe they could come with him, that way it would be a reunion of his whole family.

Jin divided his flowers into two bundles and placed them on either side of the grave. Bright yellow and white to contrast the grey stone and streaks of green growth. With a bit of help from his father and grandfather guiding his hand, Yuuji poured a scoop of water over the front of the grave. The monk mumbled a last sutra for them, before disappearing in the temple and leaving him alone with his father and son. He knelt down before the grave, tracing out the kanjis engraved on it with his fingers. His father stayed upright behind him, completely silent. Only Yuuji's occasional giggles and the chirping of the birds disrupted the quiet.

He had no idea how long he sat there, staring at the family grave, listening to the sounds of his son and the nature surrounding them and breathing in the chilly autumn air. At some point, his father grunted something about taking Yuuji back home because he was getting restless. Jin only nodded and hummed his understanding. He could not quite bring himself to go yet. Just a few more moments. He would catch up with them later.

The longer he stayed, the more memories of his time with Kaori seemed to flood him, pulling him into the world of the past. When she first approached him over a book review he had written for the school paper. All those afternoons he spent on the grand stands, cheering for her in the track and field competitions. The moment she kissed him after he witnessed her first win, behind the school with her sweaty hair still sticking to her forehead, but her face bright and lively. The awkwardness of their first time. How excited they had been when they moved in together and made convoluted plans about what to do with the shared living space. Coming home from work exhausted and watching TV together and chatting about the day. Cooking together on the weekends and challenging each other with special dishes. Kaori lying before him, bloody and her breath raspy, pulling him down to make sure he could understand her last words.

*I'm sorry*

Harsh wind tousled his hair and chilled him to the bone. Glancing up,



he noticed that the sky had turned a soft pink and orange. The sun was setting. He had spent longer out here than he thought. It was time to go back, Yuuji was waiting for him. Jin ran a hand over the coarse stone of the grave one last time. This was not a goodbye forever. He would come back many times, alone or in company. There would be another occasion to get lost in memories. When he met with them again, he should ask them to share some from Kaori's perspective as well. He smiled at his family grave and then turned to leave the temple.

Despite his closure with Kaori's death, the first night alone without even her ashes to keep him company was terrifying. He took Yuuji into the too big bed with him to feel the comfort of a living body next to him. His sleep was restless, but he made it through the night. And the night after that. Yuuji was very happy to stay with him instead of being brought to the remote crib in the evening. Like this he could make it through the weeks. The loneliness he felt did not necessarily get easier, but he got used to it. One day at a time, one night after the other, and before he knew it, a month had passed and the year was reaching its end.

Jin could not remember the last time he had spent a New Year's Eve alone. His father stayed at the family home, maybe smoking or watching a movie or sleeping through the event. He had been tempted to ask if they wanted to celebrate together, but ultimately decided against it. Being alone was not that much worse than spending time with someone who despised you. At best they would sit together in tense silence, judging each other, and at worst another argument would break out.

He had taken Yuuji to visit a nearby shrine together in the evening to make their wish for the coming year, get *omamori* and look at the lavish decorations and different booths. Jin let the boy taste some mochi and grilled fish, surprising the vendor with how agile the kid was and how fast he could gobble up the food despite being clearly still a toddler. Soon, all the excitement and new people, smells and impressions had tired the child out however and they had to return. Now, Jin was standing alone on the balcony and looking out over Sendai as holiday lights twinkled up at him, brighter than on any other day. The Daikannon statue stood out against the dark horizon,

illuminated from below for the special occasion. Yuuji had already been brought to bed, soft earmuffs over his head to blend out the noise. Midnight had just passed and the new year, 2004, had begun. The booming ring of the temple bells still echoed in his ears.

It was disconcerting to think how much had changed in just a couple of months. Last year they had been here with him and Yuuji had still been growing inside them. Back then he had been excited, but also worried about the upcoming birth. The nature of their child had stressed him out so much, he could not appreciate the moment in the present as much as he wished he had. Yuuji had been born without complications. He was a healthy and relatively happy child, his concerns had mostly been unfounded. His son had been born, but they were gone. He should have savoured the time they had had together more. Despite his anxiety, he had been in good company and the balcony had seemed less empty and cold.

Last year they had shared *toshikoshi soba* with each other before going outside around midnight. He could still remember it like a hazy dream. Them leaning on the railing, overlooking the city, while Jin hugged them from behind, his head resting on their shoulder, the short hair tickling his nose. From time to time he could feel something shifting underneath their skin where he had placed his hand on their belly. The bells were drowned out by their voice vibrating in his ears, telling him stories about the new years festivals from over a hundred years ago. Retellings of the food they had eaten at a noble's house, the peacefulness of watching the festivities from high up in the mountains, the racket of the bamboo and later paper firecrackers burnt on Chinese New Year's Eve. He did not remember much of the details, just how the evidence of their age had put him in awe and together with the movements of their unusual child between them had given him a tense but not entirely unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach.

He had always feared they would leave him eventually, but never allowed himself to really think about it, never spared a thought of how fleeting their time might be. Now it had happened. Jin rested his head in his hands, staring down at the street below, fighting down the emotions and nostalgia clamping up his throat. There was too much empty air around him. The dark sky above, the cold city stretching out till the horizon, the hard asphalt beckoning him from beneath. He was half tempted to wake up Yuuji just to have some company, but the boy needed his sleep. He could not put all his life's troubles and insecurities on those small shoulders, he needed to learn to make it through this alone. For now. He would not let himself believe that this

was how he would spend the rest of his life. Things could change, get better, if he only...

How would the next new years celebration be? Would there come a night where they could visit the shrine together as a united family of father, mother and child? A family with a troublesome start, but who had eventually found each other again? Jin had to hold onto that vision - that hope - or the sheer emptiness inside him would overwhelm him. Taking a deep breath of cool air, he pushed himself away from the tempting edge and stumbled back inside, searching for the bedroom and the familial warmth waiting there.

*He was lying on top of his sheets, staring up at the ceiling. Jin did not know what time it was. His watch was gone, but it was light enough to make out the vague outlines of his surroundings. Padding around beside him, he came up empty handed. Yuuji was not there. He frowned and pushed himself up. No sign of the child or any residual warmth. Looking around, the room seemed more barren than he remembered it. The wardrobe looming in the corner, the nightstand beside him with nothing on it, his bed freshly made and unwrinkled. No clothes on the floor, no crib at the foot of his bed, no scattered items at all.*

*Jin's gaze caught on a black streak a little bigger than his hand standing out against the white of the wall, directly above his head. He squinted, not remembering such a wide crack. When he got up on his knees to inspect it closer, it twitched. His head shot back in reflex, almost making him fall over. Gathering himself, he edged closer again. It squirmed, writhed in place, wiggled its head. Yes, there was a head with two curled antennae sprouting out of it. It sat on a long, sectioned body with little spiky legs on each side nervously clicking against the concrete wall. A centipede.*

*Revulsion rose up in him. What should he do? Squash it? But with what, he would definitely not use his bare hand. Suffocate it with a pillow? Then it would be stuck to the pillowcase and he doubted he could ever bring himself to sleep on it again. Searching around for a tool did not bring any revelations either. A thought nagged at him, a memory at the back of his mind. A centipede crawling over Kaori's body. Her - them - picking it up, letting it run over her arm completely unconcerned.*

*"Don't. If you kill one, more will come."*

*Their voice echoed in his head.*

*His heart was hammering inside his chest, his entire body felt shaky.*

Staring at the animal, he wrestled with his conviction. He could not just let it stay there. It had to go, but he could not kill it. He lifted his hand. It hovered in the air for a moment with uncertainty. Then he took a deep breath and pressed his palm against the wall in reach of the centipede, but not so close as to make it feel cornered.

*“Don’t threaten it, and it won’t hurt you. Let it come to you.”*

*The voice was as clear as if they were whispering right into his ear.*

*The insect reared its head, noticing him. Little legs and tender tendrils inspected his skin. Chitin poked his fingers. It came closer, became more confident, slowly climbed on the back of his hand. Jin barely resisted the urge to shake it off. He had to remain calm and collected, if he wanted to get rid of it. Panicking would do nothing. His arm stiffly frozen in place and eyes trained on the insect, he steadily climbed off the bed. Thankfully, the centipede did not seem in a hurry and did not move much, only crawling a little further up his arm. If it came anywhere close to his face, Jin did not know if he would be able to keep it together.*

*He was so focused on the creature, that he barely noticed his surroundings. His feet found their way into the kitchen and to the balcony door almost on their own. After a light struggle, he managed to open it. A gust of wind made the hairs on his arm stand up. Hard concrete pressed against his naked feet. The houses and lights in the distance seemed strangely foggy and no matter how much he strained his eyes, the image of them would not become clearer. It was brighter out here, however. He had no trouble making out the two chairs and the potted plants on the side. The shine of the city glinted over the inky dark exoskeleton of the insect on his arm. It looked nice, almost beautiful. Maybe their fascination for these animals was not entirely unfounded. Unsure of what to do, he looked around, searching for a good place to release it into the wild.*

*“This one was probably lost, looking for its companions.”*

*He decided to do the same thing they did, and leave it on the railing. It took a lot of discipline to not immediately shake it away, but let it climb off of him and onto solid ground by its own will. Be gentle, don’t scare it, emphasise with it. Think of what they would be doing in this situation. Once it was finally sitting on the handrail, he stumbled back in relief. That ease was short-lived. Instead of disappearing somewhere over the railing into the darkness like the last time, the insect turned and scuttled down the inner side of the railing, landing on the balcony floor and running off to a dark corner. Jin jumped out of the way with a very undignified yelp.*

*He could just about see it crawl into a crack of his wooden tool box before it disappeared. This was not how it was supposed to go. The thought of it slithering back into his home gave Jin enough courage to go after it. Steeling his nerves, he opened the box for the garden tools.*

*Writhing, twisting darkness. Bodies curling around each other. Thousands upon thousands of legs, big and small, scampering over each other. He was frozen in place. There were so many, an entire nest. An infestation.*

*Upon a first glance it seemed like pure chaos, but he soon noticed the purpose in their movements. Smaller critters scurried towards one bigger specimen, the one he had brought here. Soon, they formed a little ball, grabbing onto each other and holding themselves in a tight sphere. Then the mother's body curled around them protectively. Her head reared up, leering at Jin from inside the darkness, challenging him to dare to come closer.*

*“Did you know that they can form bonds? If one dies, the others will come looking for it.”*

*Jin retreated, slowly. His skin was clammy. He felt as if all those little chitin legs were pattering over him, digging into his flesh, into his heart, crawling inside his body and eating his strength to feed their offspring.*

*“If you don't harm them, they won't harm you. Such a simple rule, but so hard to follow.”*

*Something solid hit his back. The railing. Before he could find any support in it, he was falling. Over, down, into the foggy night, the view of his apartment getting fainter and fainter. Just as he was about to meet the asphalt of the parking lot below-*

Jin shot up in his bed, panting, his shirt soggy with sweat and clinging to his skin. A dream. Just a dream. Yuuji was sleeping peacefully next to him. He reached out a hand and let the sleeping boy grab onto his finger. Human warmth, the heat of a healthy body. Hearing the soft breaths of the child helped calm him down and gather himself. Just a dream, he has had worse.

It was a little early, but he still got up and changed clothes, searching for distractions. Despite what he told himself, the imagery of the centipede curled around her children would not leave him alone. He thought he could still hear their whispers in his ears, too quiet to make out the words and following wherever he went. The breakfast he forced down did not feel nourishing at all, the rice too stale, the

ginger too sour. Yuuji had no qualms in that regard and greedily ate his mashed organs. The colour of the food did not agree with Jin this morning, but it was the only baby food they currently had around.

Eventually, he could not stand it anymore and went out onto the balcony to reassure his paranoia and to calm his nerves. He did not bother with a sweater and instead welcomed the reality of the winter cold biting into the bare flesh of his arms.

The tool box was indeed there in the corner with a small rake and shovel lying on top of it. He had not paid much attention to it before, but he thought that he could remember it being like that for a while. Since before they left. He had not touched it afterwards, the season did not allow it anyway. Putting the tools aside, he hesitantly opened the box. A dark mountain of humus revealed itself to him. That had definitely not been in there before. Maybe they had wanted to save it for the next spring?

He reached inside and took a handful, running the cold, damp soil through his fingers. Little roots, stones, bark, the usual things you would expect in here. A sharp edge caught on his skin. Shaking off the earth, he inspected it closer. It was light brown and slightly see-through, like the brittle remains of a pupa. It was broken in several places, but there were still appendages hanging off of it that looked suspiciously like legs. Unmistakably, the discarded exoskeleton of an insect and Jin could make an educated guess of which one.

Raking his fingers through the humus, he soon came up with several other fragments. Some might have been from the same animal, but there were also smaller ones. No living being was left, but there was clear evidence that multiple centipedes had lived here at some point. While Jin was no entomologist, he was sure that the existence of several moults meant that they had spent a longer period of time nesting here.

Had they fed them after the kitchen incident and once they were gone and no food was being provided, the clutch had searched for a new home? It almost made him want to lure them back. They seemed to have cared about these creatures, regularly fed them and brought them through the winter. If the centipedes returned, maybe so did they...what a silly superstition. It was not a good idea to have these animals around, especially so many of them, while a toddler was living in the house. Yuuji's health was extraordinary, but Jin still did not want to risk anything and put the boy in unnecessary danger. A bite would hurt, even if it eventually healed. He tensely pressed his

lips together, remembering the evening he had found Yuuji with a dangerously high fever, crying into his arms. The bite of a centipede was not as bad as their experiment and that might have been the reason why they saw no issue with keeping them - Yuuji was a strong boy after all - but this was once again where Jin's opinions split from theirs.

No matter, the centipedes were gone and they would not come back any time soon. Even if that were the case, Jin would not let them anywhere near his son. His dream had just been that, a dream. His subconsciousness was working through a past memory and it just so happened that they had decided to keep the insects around. A coincidence. Just a dream. His new year's dream.

The new year started out not much different from the previous months. Nights alone with only Yuuji by his side, but also no more strange dreams. Days filled with the monotony of work and the occasional downtime, where he tried in vain to use his son to lift his spirits. There was not anything specific that pulled him down, there was just a hollowness inside him he had trouble completely shaking himself out of.

His personal highlights were the visits to the cemetery. Jin was resolutely keeping his promise. He was taking care of her - the grave. He bought a stiff brush that was perfect for removing any growing moss, ice and even some of the signs of age. The stone was starting to look less brittle and instead shimmering in the sunlight. Yuuji was always excited to help him as much as he could. Carrying the flowers, clearing off the snow, splashing water over it and waving around the brush. While he did not understand what they were doing, much less who they were doing it for, he liked to play in the grass and look at the other gravestones. It kept Jin from feeling down and wallowing too much in misery and past memories. Sometimes he saw a new bundle of flowers lying on the grave or discovered water dripping from the edges of the stone, indicating that his father came to visit as well, but they never went together.

What also pushed him forward, the event he dedicated himself to work towards was Yuuji's first birthday. The preparation for it, the completion of the photo album, kept him busy and gave him

something to look forward to, a goal. It seemed like half an eternity since Yuuji was born, so much had happened, but he also found himself perplexed that the child had already spent one year on this earth. Thinking that he would just continue to age and grow, someday becoming an adult man and not a helpless toddler was surreal in this moment, when he still tended to throw his food around and had trouble speaking in full sentences. Still, Jin hoped he would be able to witness it all, every little step of progress his son made.

The day arrived faster than expected. His father came to his apartment to celebrate, his usual scowl on his face, but the corners of his mouth turned up whenever he was talking to Yuuji. Jin had baked a little carrot cupcake for the boy and put one candle on top of it. While the kid obviously did not grasp the significance of the occasion, he did seem very happy that his father and grandfather were excited for him, smiling up brightly at them. He even managed to show the boy how to blow out his candle. Demonstrating it once, they then relit it again, telling him to try it too. His attempt contained more spit, but it got the job done and he was rewarded with some cake.

After finishing the muffin, they unwrapped the presents with him. His father had gotten a bobby car for him. A red one with rubber wheels. Once having been shown how to use it, Yuuji was not letting go of it anymore. Wherever they went, he would follow them with the car, making quite a lot of noise on the wooden floor. The second gift he opened while sitting on his new toy. Jin was sure he would only leave the thing when going to bed. Maybe not even then.

His present was not met with as much enthusiasm. He liked the outer appearance, the blue binding with fluffy clouds on it and little tigers prowling around at the bottom edge, but soon lost interest when his father opened the book and leafed through the pages. More than half of it had been left empty for later. At first he'd excitedly point at some pictures and shout "Papa!" or "Jiji!", but that enthusiasm soon waned. Yuuji found it much more interesting to play around with the steering wheel of the bobby car. That was alright, the photo album was meant for when Yuuji was older after all. It was the kind of present you would appreciate more with age. The sugar was making the kid more fidgety than usual as well.

Jin pointed to the picture of Yuuji sitting on the sofa with his mother, closely watching the boy. "Do you remember this moment? Your mother was reading you a book about the garden. They told you a lot about bees."



From the corner of his eye he could see his father frown. The child stared at the picture for a moment. His hands wandered up to face, fussing over it, picking at his shirt before sticking his fingers into his mouth. He forcefully shook his head, turning his entire body with it and looked over to his grandfather as if asking what to do or seeking help.

Jin smiled, sadly. "Well, that's alright. It was a while ago and you were still quite young."

The old man scoffed. He ignored him and resolutely turned the next page showing a picnic in the park. Yuuji distantly followed along as they continued to leaf through the album, but did not actively engage much. His father's hawk eyes kept watching Jin throughout with suspicion, but he did not speak up or criticise him for his choice of gift.

Then they reached the page with the last image, the one Jin had been looking forward to the most. It was the photo he had taken with them, where their face and scar was clearly visible and unmistakable. Heart hammering in his chest, Jin waited for his son's reaction. The kid froze as soon as he glanced at the photo, eyes widening and zeroing in on the person next to Jin's smiling face. He clasped his arms around himself and let out something between a hiccup and sob. Slowly, he started swaying his body back and forth in a display of nervous agitation. Jin gently reached out a hand and placed it on the boy's trembling shoulders. Yuuji flinched at the contact, but did not pull away. His stimming motion continued, although calmer. He turned his head to the side, forcefully avoiding looking at the book.

A stinging pain shot through his chest. He did not want to frighten the child, he had just thought that this might be a good way to reintroduce him to his mother and maybe make the memory of the experiment hurt less. He thought pictures might be a good starting point, artificial and unthreatening. The boy was still not comfortable being inside their bathroom, maybe it had been too early. Jin was just worried that he might forget his mother entirely while processing his trauma. His father would probably say that would be for the better, but he was not so quick to give up on his dream of a united family.

"Listen, I know this is hard for you, but I just wanted you to know-"

The old man slammed the book shut. "That's enough. You're scaring the boy."

Jin retracted his hand and glanced over to his father, whose fiery gaze burned into him fiercer than ever. For once he had a good reason to be mad at him, even if Jin thought he could not be faulted for trying. The man urged him to step back a bit and kneeled before Yuuji.

“Hey, forget about that. It’s not real. Nothing can hurt you here, nothing bad will happen to you.” He ran a hand over the boy’s hair. “Why don’t we go into the kitchen and see if there’s still a bit of cake left?”

His hand kept stroking the child’s back in soothing circles until the shakes had calmed down. Carefully, he pulled the toy car Yuuji was sitting on a bit forward. The motion snapped the boy out of his daze. His hands grabbed onto the steering wheel and a surprised yelp that turned into a laugh broke out of him. Immediately, the incident seemed completely forgotten, all attention refocused on his new toy. Yuuji held onto the car, while his grandfather slowly pulled him into the next room. He could hear the old man saying a few more words to the boy and high-pitched replies. Soon after, he returned to the living room glaring at Jin, who was still sitting on the ground with the photo album in his hands.

“What the hell was that?” the other man hissed. “What made you think springing that on him was a good idea?”

Jin crossed his arms defensively. “I just wanted to help him deal with his past. Burying any evidence of his mother and what happened will not be good for him in the long run. He will have to confront his trauma eventually.”

His father stared down his nose at him. “No. If it is up to me, he will not have to be confronted with anything. I will not let that person anywhere near him. It is better if he forgets he ever even had a mother.”

Gritting his teeth, Jin stood up. “Don’t be ridiculous. That is not for you to decide and you have no right to keep him away from them.”

“Actually, I do, if it compromises his health and they absolutely do. Or did.” His father’s eyes narrowed. “You know better than I do what happened, you should be even more insistent than me that they stay away from him.”

“Yes, in contrast to you, I know what happened and I also know them better than you. And I say this is not a completely hopeless situation. It is better to have the two reacquaint with each other and for Yuuji to

learn how to be around his mother again than to pretend nothing ever happened,” Jin reiterated defiantly.

His father scoffed. “You are the one who pretends nothing happened. Don’t sacrifice a child’s mental state for your naive dreams. What makes you so sure this won’t happen again? Forcing Yuuji to have to deal with that monster is irresponsible. I pray to all the gods that may listen that they will never come back and the boy can forget them and what his parents did to him.”

Jin opened his mouth, but found himself without air to form words. What would he have even said? Nothing came up, his mind was empty except for his father’s words that kept turning in his head indefinitely. He just wanted the best for everyone. He just wanted them to be together. He was confident - he knew - they could do it. If only...if they...if he...

But wasn’t his father right? Would it not be more merciful to just let Yuuji forget? And all this was based on the assumption that they would come back, eventually. What if they didn’t? Jin had waited this whole time. He had thought they might not get in touch with him, but they might acknowledge their son’s birthday, the passage of his first year of life. A visit in person was unlikely, but a phone call maybe? Or just a postcard? A nondescript package with a present that could be from nobody else but them? Nothing. So far there had been no sign from them.

Had they forgotten not only about him but their child? Taken in by whatever other project they were currently pursuing. However, Jin remembered well the hardship they had gone through to push the boy into the world. The way they had been rapidly sapped of all their strength, forcing them to accommodate to a new diet. They had broken his hand so great had been their pain during birth. And their satisfied face in the hospital, all the evenings they had spent telling the boy stories. They remembered events from a millenia ago, they would not forget their own son over the span of a year. So they were ignoring their family on purpose? Wanted to distance themselves? What if Yuuji instead had to remember for the rest of his life that he had been left and forgotten by his mother? No, he could not start thinking like this.

He clenched his hand into a fist and pushed past his father into the kitchen. Yuuji was still sitting on his bobby car, pushing the last crumb of carrot cake into his mouth and smiling up at him as he entered. His father followed close behind. The boy drove excited

circles around them, playing as if nothing ever happened, but the way he looked between the two adult men, watching their reactions, it was clear that he could feel the tension in the air as well. Jin was not the only one who had to force a smile. Nonetheless, he bowed down to his son, kissed his cheek and ruffled his hair, assuring him that everything was alright.

His father left only half an hour later. In their current mood they were in no condition to celebrate a birthday and it was getting late anyway. With only a bit of whining Yuuji also let himself be lifted off the car and brought to bed. As it had been a very exciting day for him in many ways, it did not take long for him to fall asleep. Jin did not find peace as fast. The words of his father still stung at him. So did their absence. Even over the next few days, he kept looking out for a package. His heartbeat picked up any time he got a letter or the telephone rang or there was a knock on his door. Something that showed that if belated, they had remembered their son's existence. And him. Nothing. No sign, no present, no presence.

It was difficult not to fall back into old habits and self-defeating thoughts. After over half a year it was hard to keep up his optimistic attitude with only a couple of flimsy promises and a photograph to hold onto. He did not try to show the photo to Yuuji again because no matter if his father was right or not, he was clearly not ready for it yet, but Jin spent way too much time looking at it and wondering if the shards that were his life and dreams could really all be repaired again.

Every day felt the same. Bring Yuuji to his father, retrieve him in the evening and then try to do some activities like visiting the river on the weekend that didn't feel quite right and never recaptured the joy he felt in the first months after Yuuji's birth. Recently he had started introducing Yuuji to playgrounds. It was important that the boy learned to socialise with children his age or older, since he was developing quicker than others. The biggest hurdle in that case was his strength. He had learned how to interact with Jin and his grandfather without hurting them, but they were a lot more sturdy and accustomed to pain than the fellow toddlers.

It had started to become quite stressful. Jin felt like he had to

constantly hover over Yuuji's shoulders to make sure he did not trip someone up or shove them a little too hard. An incident had already happened where one child fell from the swing when Yuuji pushed them from behind, but thankfully there was no serious injury aside from the shock and everyone around saw it as an accident.

One afternoon in the summer, Jin was sitting on a shadowy bench, watching his son climbing up the play house and scooting down again on the slide. A woman around his age sat next to him. At first he did not really pay her any mind, but eventually she spoke up.

"That boy of yours is quite lively."

He glanced over to her. Low ponytail, glasses, long skirt. She looked like a typical housewife.

"Yes he is, it's even worse indoors." He gave her a polite smile.

"Sorry, I don't mean to pry, I just noticed you coming here often. The hair stands out quite a lot, that's how he caught my eye. But it's always just you with him. How come?"

So much for not prying. What boredom could do to people. "My father takes care of him too. You probably haven't seen him though, he lives in another district."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Two men taking care of a child? Now that is something you don't see often. Is there no mother in the picture?"

Her last question sounded a little too nosy. "Not at the moment," Jin countered patiently and then added, "due to work," to not ignite any potential hopes.

The woman sighed. "Do make sure she spends some time with him though. It is important for boys to have a female presence in their life as well. Forgive me for saying this, but there are some things men can't teach or understand. It's a different type of care for the child."

Jin had to clear his throat to cover up his initial reaction. How very ironic. They indeed had a very different understanding of care than him.

"We are managing just fine. His mother is not really the nurturing kind," he countered evenly.

She leaned her head in her hand. "I see, I am sorry to hear that. Do

make sure he gets contact with women though. It is important for a child's development."

Before Jin could make any kind of assurance about the gender ratio present in Yuuji's life, a high-pitched wail interrupted their conversation. Both of their heads shot around to the playground and Jin found himself already up on his feet. A boy was lying at the bottom of the slide, clutching his arm and sobbing into the sand. To his terror, Jin spotted his son standing at the upper end in the playhouse, staring wide-eyed down at his playmate, too shocked to move. Parents came sprinting from all directions. Jin was not far behind. Once at the scene, he could see that the boy's arm had already started to swell and there were splatters of blood on him as well as the lower part of the slide.

"He fell!" Someone shouted.

"That boy pushed him!" Another one interjected.

Jin jostled his way through the small crowd and lifted his arms up to help his son down. The kid let himself fall into his embrace, grabbing his shirt and shaking slightly at the shouts and angry glares directed at him. He turned them so Yuuji could only look at him and block out the other parents.

"What happened?" he mumbled. "It's alright, I'm not blaming you, just tell me."

"We wer' play'n'," Yuuji stammered. "He want'd to slide. I help'd him."

And then he likely gave the kid a too hard shove that let him bounce right to the bottom and break his arm on the side of the metal slide. He really wished he had someone by his side right now who could heal wounds. It would still look bad, but at least nobody would have to go to the hospital. Sighing, he turned back to the crowd and walked towards the mother who was cradling her injured son, trying to calm him down. Someone had apparently already called an ambulance.

Kneeling down to be on eye-level with her, he sincerely apologised. "I'm sorry, my son meant no harm." The woman fired a glare at him and the frightened child in his arms. "He is growing and sometimes doesn't know where to go with his energy. They were really only playing." Yuuji's miserable face peeking at her seemed to mellow out her anger. "I can give you my number and then your insurance company can get in contact with me in regards to payment for the

hospital bill.”

She tutted, but eventually said. “Alright. Just leave me. I can’t stand seeing your or your son’s face right now.”

The others were not quite as reserved about their judgement, demanding a bigger apology, that he do something more, that Yuuji should receive some corrective punishment. Comments behind his back about how things like this were bound to happen if you let fathers raise boys. As soon as the ambulance arrived and he had given out his contact information, Jin was out of there. He knew he should not let these remarks get to him, but he could not help but question his own parenting skills. These things were bound to happen due to his son’s extraordinary status and it was no question that his mother’s presence would not have improved things much - if anything more might have been injured including Yuuji himself - however the what-ifs still tumbled through his head. Had he been more attentive, watched the boy closer, maybe done some exercises with him to give him a better understanding of his body, this might not have happened. The last point was something he tried to follow through on over the next weeks by having Yuuji practice interactions with his plushies, but he did not get the impression that it helped the child much.

His son had been devastated by the event as well. They were going to a different playground now, but Jin noticed how Yuuji had become a lot more reserved. He did not touch the other children if it could be avoided and was less encouraging about initiating games. Unfortunately, he had learned the hard way what his small hands could do to others and the shock seemed to sit deep in his heart. While he was glad that the boy was becoming more careful, he did not want him to restrict part of his personality as a consequence. It was a tricky situation to balance and he was not sure how to. He did not want Yuuji to hurt others, but also did not want him to get hurt in the process. This was an issue too great to be covered by any parenting guide book. ‘How to keep your child from unintentionally gravely injuring others?’ That was not a problem many had to deal with.

He was not even sure where to start, how to be there for Yuuji and make him familiar with what he was capable of. He could do no more than say "be careful" and "it is not your fault". These phrases would get old very fast as his son aged, grew and further improved. The person who knew his body best and what to expect in this situation was not here. He considered calling that number, but he doubted he would get much helpful information from them. They saw Yuuji as just a word and some numbers on a piece of paper. That was not what he needed.

Jin needed someone who knew Yuuji as a person, as a human, but also had insights into his creation. Once he knew what to expect and what exactly he was dealing with, he could be of better help for the boy, but as it was, he was completely powerless and basically forced the child to figure himself out on his own. He could not do this alone.

One night, he got torn out of his sleep by a phone call. Grumpily he blinked into the darkness, taking a moment to orient himself and figure out where the noise was coming from. Yuuji mumbled something next to him and then turned over, continuing his sleep as if nothing had happened. Jin was half tempted to do the same, but figured that if someone was calling him this late, it must be important. With a groan he pushed himself out of the bed and staggered out of the bedroom into the hallway where their telephone sat on a narrow table.

Sighing, he picked up the receiver and croaked out a “Hello?”

*“Hey, it’s me,”* a breathy voice chimed from the other end. It was hard to pin down if it was a man with a rather high cadence or a woman with a deeper one. Jin’s tiredness did not help in that regard. *“Let’s meet up, I need to talk to you.”*

Jin frowned and rubbed at his eyes, noticing that he had forgotten to put on his glasses. It was too dark to see anyway and he did not feel like searching for the lightswitch. The words only slowly trickled into his consciousness, but they did not make any more sense. He was sure that the voice was unfamiliar. He could not connect it to anyone he knew. And yet, he hesitated when he was about to tell the caller that they had the wrong number and had woken him up for nothing. There was something about it, the tone in which the words were said - careless and playful - that reminded him of someone, of other late-night visits.

He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. It might have been the fatigue that eventually let him whisper, “Kaori?”

The name had naturally found its way onto his tongue, but as soon as the word left his mouth, he wanted to kick himself. When said out loud, it became evident how ridiculous the statement was. Of course this wasn’t her - or them - the sound of the voice had made that much



clear. It was clearly the voice of a stranger.

A light chuckle came from the other side. *“That is what you used to call me.”*

The ground underneath him seemed to move. Jin had to hold onto the wooden surface of the table to steady himself. His heart was hammering inside his chest. Blood was rushing in his ears, making him worried he might have missed or misunderstood their words, but the way the statement echoed in his head, with that familiar intonation said in a foreign voice, it was unmistakably true.

His mind was racing. Words, questions, exclamations and explanations struggled between each other to push their way out first. He should ask them where they were, where they had been and why they were only calling now, after almost a year had passed with no contact. He should admonish them for leaving him and their son when he needed them most, for seemingly forgetting about their family until it was convenient for them to return. He should be angry with them for leaving in the first place and letting him raise their child alone, for providing no help or assurance or hope of reunion. There was so much to say and he couldn't decide what to start with, couldn't find the strength to push the critical words past his lips, too relieved about finally hearing from them again.

So in the end, he simply asked, “What should I call you now?”

Before anything else, Jin at last wanted to know the identity of the person whom he was trying to build a life with. Kaori had been buried and this was clearly not her, it could not get any more evident. It would be disrespectful to not call them by any name, so he wanted to take this opportunity to make up for his past willful blindness. There was a pause on the other side, maybe in surprise or in consideration of how much they were willing to confide.

*“‘Kenjaku’ is fine.”*

Jin did not react at first, thinking there would be more to it, but this short statement was all he got. Definitely not what he had expected. He was not even sure if it was a given name or a surname. It sounded like a given name, but he wasn't confident about that assertion. Certainly not one he had heard before. And was this their full name or did they just not want to divulge more.

“Kenjaku?” he echoed. “Is that your real name or the name of your... of...someone else?”

The questions came out awkwardly. Jin had the feeling it was somehow a rude thing to ask. He did not even know exactly how he should refer to the body they were likely occupying right now. It was good to remember that despite the changes, he was not actually hearing their real voice. This one must have been borrowed from someone else as well. He also wanted to know how open they were willing to be with him. Their answer could always be a lie, of course, but he wanted to hear them say it.

*"It is a name unique to me."*

Quite a cryptic way of saying it, but their relationship to given names and their own name was likely different from his experience after having undergone so many changes of identity. He smiled. So, they were actually willing to give him their name. Would they have said it earlier if he had just asked? This moment felt special. Maybe they had gained trust in him and their distance had affected them too in some way. It seemed like they were closer or had regained some of that intimacy from before. Taking the phone with him, he sank down to the floor.

His mind picked at the name itself. Turning it around in his head, he tried to come up with possible meanings, but he was not even sure which kanji might be used for it. There seemed infinite possibilities and none felt quite right.

"I definitely have not heard it before. What does it mean? How do you write it?"

*"It is derived from Fukukenjaku Kannon,"* came the blunt answer.

Jin's brows shot up. "Kannon?"

Impressions of the white statue looming over the city of Sendai ran through his mind. A bodhisattva known for mercy, compassion and fertility. Having forsaken Buddhahood to stay with humanity and guide them. Said to appear interchangeably as both a woman and a man. The Byakue Kannon statue was holding the *cintamani* gem that could allegedly fulfil wishes. Kaori and him used to go to her to pray for an opportunity to have a child.

Jin felt insane for even considering this, but he just had to ask.

"You are not...actually...?"

They could heal wounds, they could revive the dead, they could take

over other people's bodies. The question did not seem entirely unreasonable.

A short laugh rang in his ear. *"No. The name is inspired by them, but no relation."*

His ears felt hot. "Oh. I see."

But really, there was not much substantial difference from his perspective. They had fulfilled his wish for a child. It did not turn out like he had imagined it, but he had a family of his own now. The path to get there had been full of loss and grief and pain, but in a way he had gotten what he wanted. Kaori was dead and his relationship to his father close to shattering, but he still had a family in the end. Kenjaku had taken a lot from him, put him and their child through unspeakable things, but it had not all been bad. His wish had been granted by them.

Pressing the receiver a little tighter to his ear, he quietly said, "I like your name."

He thought he could hear a soft gasp or deep breath from them. There was no other answer. Kenjaku stayed silent. Jin did not feel affronted by the reaction. It felt more genuine to him than pushing the statement aside with a simple 'thanks'.

"Where are you now?" he continued the conversation before the silence could become uncomfortable.

In all this excitement and the things he had learned about them, he had almost forgotten the abrupt but important introduction at the beginning of their call. They wanted to meet again. And talk. Out of their own initiative. All Jin had been waiting for during the past year.

*"Do you remember the apartment we stayed at in Tokyo?"*

Jin remembered dark, empty staircases, dingy rooms with no but also too much personality, sleeping on the hard floor with a thin *futon* beneath him, and blue child-sized eyes that watched him from atop a high shelf. The last one in particular gained a whole new meaning, now that he had seen what they were willing to do to their own child. Did he really want to return there? Then again, there was not much difference to meeting them anywhere else. There might be parts of Kenjaku he did not like - that even frightened him - but he did not want to decline their offer and miss a chance to rehabilitate his dream, only because of that.

"It was Iidabachi, right?" he replied, voice not as confident as before.

*"Yes and then in the direction of Zenkokuji."*

He nodded. On-site it would be relatively easy to find unless they made big structural changes to the buildings.

"I can find it again, I will be there," he assured them, a tad too vehement.

They chuckled at his energetic response. *"Good. It doesn't really matter when you show up as long as it is within the next week. I don't plan to move around much and I'll notice when you're close by."*

That made things easier, but he would not need that much time. He just had to give his workplace some excuse - a family emergency - for his disappearance and then he could be on his way. Around this season and outside of peak traffic periods, a shinkansen should not be that difficult to book. For a moment he considered taking Yuuji with him, but remembering his reaction to merely a photo, a surprise visit was probably not the best idea. They could work on reintroduction after their meeting and he had found out what Kenjaku's plans for the future were.

"I think I'll be able to be there tomorrow evening or the day after."

They hummed. *"Suit yourself."*

A location, a time, it made it all the more palpable, that he really would see them again and talk to them face-to-face, touch them. There was so much he wanted to ask them and tell them. Yuuji's development, his mental state, where they had been, if they had actually kept an eye on what he had been up to and if they did watch him, why did they never say anything? Talk about everyday, unimportant things and observations. Above all else, he craved to be able to lean on someone else again and put his trust in them. He needed a companionship his son could not provide for him, especially not at this age. He needed contact, intimacy, with a living person that was willing to spend their life with him. He just wanted to feel them again.

Jin let out a shaky breath. "I missed you."

There was silence, then a hum droned in his ear, sounding satisfied and a bit mischievous. Something in the pit of his belly tingled at the tone. It sounded deeper than he was used to, but not so different that

he would not recognize it. Kenjaku had not changed much in their time apart.

*“As sentimental as ever,”* they replied, the smile visible in their words.

He felt like he was back in high school again, when he would talk with Kaori until late at night and none of them wanted to hang up first.

“See you then,” he breathed softly.

*“Yeah, see you.”*

After a short pause, where they both quietly listened to the other’s breath, he heard a click and then the noise of a disconnected phone line. The reply had not sounded very heartfelt or intimate on the surface of it, but the emphasis on the last two words confirmed for him that they were looking forward to their meeting as well. Of course they were, it had been their suggestion, their invitation. They had reached out to him with the wish to see him again. That wish was likely not out of pure sentimentality or longing, but it was enough for him. He knew they would never be forward with their feelings like that and he still appreciated the gesture.

He sat on the ground for a little longer, cradling the telephone in his lap and smiling into the darkness. It finally happened, it was finally happening. If this was a dream, it was the best he had had in a while. Standing up and putting the phone where it belonged, he returned to the bedroom. Yuuji was lying in the middle, tightly wrapped in his blanket and fast asleep.

Jin ran his hand over the boy’s soft hair. It would be difficult for him to adjust to his mother being there again, but he was sure that it was a step in the right direction. Nothing would get better if they did not start working through it. He could not hate Kenjaku for what they did to their son or him, instead he wanted them to make up for it with their actions. He would lend help and support where it was needed.

There was a chance for them to be together again. There was a chance that his wish for a united family was not completely hopeless. They could fix the mistakes of the past. When he met up with them again, he could tell them everything he always wanted to tell them. Ask them why they had kept the ring. Bring them to get involved with their son and husband again. He would make them apologise for what they did and he would make sure they made their amends with Yuuji. He could do this. If he just met up with them, he could fix it all. He

could get his family back.

Wasuke opened the apartment door with his spare key. It had been locked, amplifying the pressure on his nerves. By now, it was almost midnight. Jin had said he would come back from his work trip today. He should have picked up Yuuji hours ago. He had tried calling him on the landline and on his work phone, but gotten no answer. It might just be a late train, but in that case Jin would have contacted him from a hotel to inform him. The little boy was currently sleeping under the kotatsu at the Itadori house, letting Wasuke give in to his agitation and slip out of the home with only minor worries about Yuuji's wellbeing. Under these circumstances he could not just go peacefully to sleep, hoping to hear the ring of the doorbell in the middle of the night or the next morning. If at all. Even keeping in mind Jin's usual strange behaviour, this was concerning.

The apartment was silent, the lights out. Somewhere far away you could hear the hum of the refrigerator. Wasuke checked the bedroom first. He didn't care if his son was dead on his feet, that was no excuse to forget about Yuuji. The bed was empty, the sheets looked like they had not been touched in days. Frowning, he turned around and searched the other rooms. The creases on his face only deepened with every abandoned living space he encountered. Dread seized his heart. Jin was not here. What was even more concerning, Jin's suitcase was here. It looked like he had not taken anything with him when leaving except for a few valuables. Even his bag for work sat forgotten in the corner.

Wasuke stood before the phone, seeing his two missed calls blinking up at him from the answering machine. Jin had not gone on a work trip. He could only think of one other reason for why Jin might leave spontaneously without taking Yuuji with him. The old man clenched his fist. His son had told him to take care of the child for only three days, meaning he had expected to return. But he didn't.

Leaning forward, he braced himself against the table, trying in vain to even out his breathing. He should have expected this to happen. He did expect this to happen. His son was so stupid, so naive, so self-destructive. He was stupid. He should have done something, talking had not been enough and he had known that. There must have been

signs beforehand. However, with the way Jin had been acting the last year, he was sure he would've been unable to stop him from going after them unless he tied him down. He wanted to tell himself that Jin deserved it, that it would have always led to this, but he just couldn't.

What should he do now? Look for him or what was left of him? But where? And what about Yuuji? Yuuji, the poor innocent boy who had the misfortune of being born to those parents. He had to protect him. He had to make sure the same did not happen to him as well. If they had come for Jin, they would come eventually for him too. His son had told him they kept an eye on the child. He had to get back home. He would not let his last remaining family member be ripped away by that person as well.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading, I hope you enjoyed(?) it :3

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